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NOTES ON MEDITATION

by Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

1. Mindfulness of breathing, bhikkhus, developed and repeatedly practised, is of great fruit, of great benefit; mindfulness of breathing, bhikkhus, developed and repeatedly practised, perfects the four foundations of mindfulness; the four foundations of mindfulness, developed and repeatedly practised, perfect the seven enlightenment factors; the seven enlightenment factors, developed and repeatedly practised, perfect knowledge and freedom...

2. Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty place, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.

3. Breathing in long, he knows, 'I breathe in long'; or breathing out long, he knows, 'I breathe out long.'

4. Breathing in short, he knows, 'I breathe in short'; or breathing out short, he knows, 'I breathe out short.'

5. 'Experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe in,' he trains himself thus; 'experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe out,' he trains himself thus.

6. 'Calming the bodily determination, I shall breathe in,' he trains himself thus; 'calming the bodily determination, I shall breathe out,' he trains himself thus...

Ānāpānasati Sutta, MN 118.

1. The practice of ānāpānasati or mindfulness of breathing represents a phenomenological exercise in developing the principle of simultaneity (akālikā dhamma). This is accomplished by the sufficient establishing of mindfulness and knowledge of what one is supposed to do and discern.¹ It is an exercise because it requires one actively engaging in and being aware of the act of breathing, and it develops the principle of simultaneity because while one is actively breathing, one is aware of one's actions (body, feelings,

and thoughts). These are two different, simultaneously present things: the physical or bodily act of breathing, and the mental reflexive thoughts of one doing that very act. One is not supposed to be favoured on account of the other; a person should not be overdoing the breathing (i.e. turning it into a forceful breathing exercise) nor should he be underdoing it (i.e. forgetting about the act of breathing that is being performed, and letting it happen unawares). In the same sense one should not overthink one's thinking (i.e. get lost in thought). The point is to mindfully breathe while remaining fully aware of oneself-mindfully-breathing, or – to put it simply – to remain aware of the present phenomenon of “I am breathing.”

2. Breathing is an intentional action, not a habit, and there is volition involved in every single breath a person takes. The reason why most people think breathing is an automated process is because they are almost never aware of it. Thus the intentional side of the breath remains obscured.² By being an act (*kamma*), it has potential, if understood as such, to reveal the nature of all acts (present, future and past), of everything one has ever intentionally done and planning to do. By being an intentional act, breathing shares the same universal nature as all good and evil actions in this world. The reason why breathing is such a suitable act for the practice of mindfulness³ is because it is an immediately neutral action, there is no actual good or bad involved in it. Thus, although it shares the same nature as all these other more “*kammically*” (and consequentially) engaging acts, there are no future results involved that would pertain to oneself and others. The merit of an in-breath ceases with an out-breath.

3. As we see from the opening excerpt, by “training oneself thus...,” a monk develops mindfulness of both immediate and possible action (*kamma*): “I breathe in/out (thus)...,” and “(thus) I shall breathe in/out....” This kind of mindfulness when developed leaves nothing out, and one is simply, yet steadily, becoming more aware of the nature of action in general while that very action is actually present. Ultimately of course, this leads to the full transparency of that “I”, in that experience of breathing as a whole, and it's utterly redundant nature that is being gratuitously assumed.⁴ This nature, if mindfulness pursued to the extent necessary,⁵ can eventually be completely understood and the gratuitous “I” destroyed. This, however, should not be taken in a sense that the phenomenon of “I” would disappear like it was never there, but in a sense that that “I” will cease to be “me” and “mine”. It will remain just standing there, hollow and dry.

4. The reason why it is recommended that one should sit when exercising mindfulness of breathing is because such a posture offers the least distractions to one's mind. When seated, one will not be engaging in any other action different from breathing (and passively sitting of course). So, the only thing that one is going to be doing is breathing. In this way it can be understood that sitting is the most optimal posture to have, so that one wouldn't be wasting any effort. Consequently, with the further development of the discernment of the simultaneously present phenomena, and with the strengthening of mindfulness, one can more freely assume other postures and not remain confined to sitting alone. Furthermore, even engaging in other acts, for example: “while breathing, I am sweeping the floor,” will not be a distraction for one's mindfulness in any way. In this particular instance, one's mindfulness and discernment is divided, or shared by, two simultaneously present actions (sweeping and breathing), while one is also simultaneously aware of that thing as a whole. And this division can continue as far as the strength of one's mindfulness allows, though there is no particular benefit and reason in pushing it.

5. Sometimes people assume that in ānāpānasati one is mindful of the “body of breath,” as opposed to just one’s (experience of) body.⁶ This rendering comes from the confusion and lack of phenomenological insight into the nature of the (appearing) body. If one is to understand that whether it is the ordinary experience of one’s body in everyday existence, or an unusual one resulting from the new practice of concentration, or even a strange sense of lightness of one’s body on drugs, in phenomenological terms – body is just there. Thus, again, regardless of the particular way one’s body presents itself, it is the phenomenon of the body that is present, and that’s what one should be concerned with. So, when practising mindfulness of breathing, one actually devotes direct attention to the ‘act of breathing,’ that body (or that strange-sense-of-body) that emerges as a phenomenon, peripherally, is that which is the body, in that experience right then and there. In this way one experiences one’s body through an act of breathing, which is why the Buddha said that body, as one of the foundations of mindfulness, is brought to fulfilment in the practice of ānāpānasati.⁷

By being able to see peripherally that which appears as peripheral, but simultaneously present, one does not conceive it. It is the intention in regard to the peripheral,⁸ which tends to make things actual⁹ that carries appropriation. If one succeeds in leaving it peripheral (i.e. the way it has arisen), one is practicing mindfulness correctly. The tendency towards ‘conceivings’ will slowly fade when the mindfulness reaches the necessary extent. Again, knowledge of what the conceiving is (i.e. not understanding the phenomenon of simultaneously and dependently present and leaving it as such), is an absolute requirement, because without it this whole practice won’t bear fruits of any fundamental importance. However, even a puthujjana, by trying to understand what the correct practice of mindfulness is, might actually understand it, and then cease to be a puthujjana, so this whole practice should be encouraged regardless.¹⁰

6. The contemporary Buddhist outlook usually equates the practice of ānāpānasati with the practice of jhānas, and if not regarded as the same, it is too often thought that by practicing ānāpānasati one will by default “enter” a jhāna. I suspect this assumption stems from the commentarial times, whereby various meditation techniques, that revolve around the idea of the mindfulness of breathing, were concocted and advertised as something that would directly lead to the experience of jhānas.¹¹

Jhānas are the establishments of mind, and as such they are to be developed upon the sufficient degree of mindfulness, which in return can be established upon various different things, ānāpānasati being one of them.¹² Thus, it should be clear, that the practice of jhāna is a fundamentally different practice from ānāpānasati. While ānāpānasati shares a nature of the phenomenological exercise of one’s actions in regard to body, feelings, mind and thoughts, jhāna is less of that, but more of an establishment of one’s mind upon a certain way of attending to things (in this case upon a phenomenological surmounting of the sensual domain), and the discernment involved therein. In other words, by understanding what jhāna is, one enters it,¹³ not by performing a set of prescribed motions that somehow make it “happen” to one.

Obviously, one can develop and establish an unwavering mindfulness through the practice of ānāpānasati, and once established one could change one’s outlook and with such mindfulness recognize the extent of sensuality, as a phenomenon, and what exactly it entails, and by doing so step outside of it, so to speak. In

this way one would enter the first jhāna, where that mindfulness would remain fully established and can be developed even further.¹⁴ It is clear here that it is not that ānāpānasati in itself took one automatically into a jhāna, but that the change of attending to things did,¹⁵ once the mindfulness was strong enough. Furthermore, jhāna is not taught as a goal in itself, as Kāyagatāsati Sutta (MN 119) tells us, but as one of the forms that can bring one's mindfulness to the necessary fulfillment.

So, in order for any of these paragraphs to be intelligible, one will have to abandon the notions of "meditation techniques" and all the contemporary ideas of the practice of concentration, which is usually taught at the expense of mindfulness and with underlying wrong views (such as mystical absorptions and novelty experiences that then become a measure of one's "success"). When a person hears the term ānāpānasati, he will be better off thinking "development of mindfulness" – the same mindfulness that he has to varying extents in his day-to-day experiences.

7. "Meditation techniques" are usually sets of fairly random motions and performances, idiosyncratic to the particular meditation teacher, that require one to follow certain prescribed steps which if performed correctly, and with some luck, will make one experience "something". Often, in return, that same teacher would have to "interpret" back these experiences for one.

To put it bluntly: if one needs to be told by another what the significance of one's experience was, this means one has not understood it by oneself. It means one is still concerned with the particular aspects (i.e. the random contents) of one's meditation experience, and one fails to see the general nature of it all. As a result, any external interpretation is regarded as an explanation, which means that phenomenology remains buried deep down under layers of preconceived ideas and assumptions. This holds true even more when it comes to the idea of "attainments", which are also regarded as experiences that "happen" to one, almost against one's will and as a result of "a very good technique" one has employed. There is a concealed irony there that escapes such people, because if one needs to be "confirmed" a sotāpanna, for example, by one's teacher, this means one doesn't know that one actually is a sotāpanna, which means that one can still doubt it, which in return means that one is not freed from the fetter of doubt, i.e. actually not a sotāpanna. The irony is further amplified if the teacher goes ahead and "confirms" one. If one is to actually understand what "being free from doubt" (and the other two fetters, characteristic of the sotāpanna) is, one would realize how non-applicable any external affirmation or denial is.¹⁶

How obstructive to phenomenology (i.e. mindfulness) this whole way of practising is, can be seen from the nature of understanding. One understands things when one understands them, when the knowledge in regard to the nature of an arisen thing is there, and not when one successfully goes through a set of methods and observances that relies on an almost mechanical set of motions one has to perform attentively. Any bodily act and any act that pertains to the bodily domain (such as the celebrated and misguided notion of "sensations"¹⁷ which involve observing different parts and aspects of one's body) is simply irrelevant for the discerning of the nature of an arisen phenomenon.¹⁸ It is misleading and obstructive, because it is impossible to engage in a technique without the implicit belief that a set of motions, that the chosen technique consists of, performed in a particular mechanical order, will somehow, by itself, reveal the nature

of things. By holding this belief and faith in a technique, one will not be trying to understand things, and by not making attempts toward the understanding, one will definitely remain devoid of it.

One sees things correctly – as phenomena – by understanding what the phenomenon is, and there is no technique that can make this magically occur. Thus, the closest to what one should do in order to obtain understanding is: trying to understand. For as long as a person is attempting to understand and see the nature of an arisen thing, that person might actually succeed in it, for it is certain that understanding cannot occur in someone who is not trying to understand. Incidentally (or not), there is never any mention of meditation techniques in the Suttas, but ‘understanding’ and ‘discernment’, as a way to reach the final freedom from suffering, is described and referred to countless times.

When one looks at the experience mindfully, it becomes apparent that regardless of the content of the particular experience, the nature of experience is present. So, whether it is the experience of “impatiently-waiting-for-a-bus,” or the experience of tiredness after a physical exertion, or strange and novel experience of a powerful light that occurred in front of me while meditating on a seven-day technique-based meditation retreat, all I should be concerned about is that an experience is there and as such it needs to be understood.¹⁹ This means that investing effort into meditation techniques is fundamentally a waste of time if one is concerned with understanding the Dhamma, and the most one can accomplish is relaxation, a sense of peace coming from withdrawal from the habitual world of senses, or – worse – fortification of the wrong views based on a misinterpretation of the nature of the novelty experiences. Either way, the results of any technique one might engage in, will remain worldly, and will draw its power from a temporary change of one’s environment, one’s usual way of regarding things. In any case, the “benefits” and “helpfulness” of a chosen technique will simply share the nature of a phenomenon of novelty that one is experiencing. As such, it means it will run out, and one will have to either do it harder, or change the technique.

If people attend meditation retreats as a form of a temporary escape from the busy and oppressing world, by all means they should do it, as often as they can. However, rather than engaging in a practice of a technique and “sensation watching,” they would be better off using their quiet time in trying to understand the nature of things according to the way the Buddha described it, whether sitting, walking or lying down. For it is that “nature” which the Dhamma means and refers to, and anything that is not dealing with this, or anything that is obscuring that very nature (i.e. phenomena) of things, consequently is not the Dhamma, no matter how “helpful” and “useful” it might be.²⁰ In different words, one’s experience is phenomenological (i.e. the five aggregates are all simultaneously present in their respective domains), and this means that nature of things comes first,²¹ before anything one does based on that nature. Doing a technique in order to practice the Dhamma (i.e. see the nature of things) is like exiting the house, so as to be in it. It’s a contradiction in terms.

8. In the first establishment of mind, the first jhāna, the appropriation of the bodily action (intention) ceases. This is accomplished when that thought, which in ordinary experience stands for that which is the body (and anything originating from it) is seen in its phenomenological nature, i.e. as thought,²² When the mind is thus established upon the signs and characteristics of one’s thought, as an arisen thing, that thought is recognized as being indifferent²³ to anything other than itself, such as body and matter.²⁴ Through that

very indifference, the thought, even if it thinks about the body and anything bodily, ceases to stand for ‘that’ which is the body (rūpa). This is why the first jhāna is primarily characterized by thinking-and-pondering (vittakavicāra) and it is also why the sensual domain (i.e. domain that is pertaining to the body) has been surmounted. The result of this cessation is the subsiding of speech – the physical, bodily aspect of it. By dropping the appropriation of the bodily intention, through the surmounting of its whole domain, one clearly sees the whole body as an independent thing, just sitting there, already given. Even if one is to make a bodily intention, one would see that intention too, as something that is inevitably and inseparably confined to the bodily domain and as such: as something that can never be “mine”. This is why the first establishment of mind is also sufficient for the final knowledge.²⁵

Furthermore, it is because of this very principle of thought ceasing to ‘stand for’ that which is the body, that the jhānas are wholesome in themselves, even if not accompanied by understanding. By “ceasing to stand for” the wrong order of the experience is reversed, and the structurally independent, simultaneously present and indifferent to each other individual domains of the aggregates are experienced as they are, without the distortion introduced by assumption in regard to them. This is why the Buddha praised the practice of jhāna, because if the person develops them correctly, even as a puthujjana, he would require very little instruction in order to understand things and remove all conceivings and avijjā.

1 Which is why in order to correctly do any of the practices found in the Suttas, one needs the right view first.

2 Cf. Ñāṇavīra Thera, *Clearing the Path*, p. 195.

3 As recommended in SN 54:9.

4 Whether it is “I am breathing in,” or “I shall breathe in,” through mindful repetition the “I” begins to stand out, so to speak, and when paired with understanding, the more it “stands out,” the less it is mine.

5 Cf. MN 10.

6 This should not be mistaken as “sensations”. See below.

7 The same principle applies to the other foundations, namely – feelings, mind and thoughts.

8 That which is simultaneously present, but “less” there, less actual.

9 Or: “Right in front of us”; to “take them up.”

10 This doesn’t mean that any (i.e. all sorts of contradictory) practice of meditation is being endorsed here. This is because, for a puthujjana, no matter how much effort he makes, if the practice he has chosen or been given is inherently wrong, no right results can come from it. One does not accidentally become sotāpanna, it

doesn't "happen to one" as a blessing. One builds it up, develops it and attains it through "manly efforts," as the Suttas often say, and because it was not given to one, it cannot be taken away.

11 Which inevitably acquired countless mystical connotations that they maintain to this day.

12 Cf. SN 54:8.

13 Cf. SN 40:1.

14 Cf. MN 119.

15 Cf. SN 54:8.

16 Cf. Sn 1:3,21 (verse 55).

17 Cf. Ñāṇavīra Thera, *Clearing the Path*, p. 75.

18 In other words, it is impossible to perform an action which in and by itself would be able to overcome the nature of action, which is the whole point of the Buddhist practice: overcoming kamma. Through action, good or bad or neutral, all one accomplishes is the maintenance of the nature of action: by acting, one remains bound by action. If this would not be the case, the Buddha and the Dhamma would not be required for the freedom from suffering, and all one would have to do is simply perform certain things and by doing so, automatically reach nibbāna, or even better: all one would have to do is choose to be in nibbāna and one would attain it.

19 And one also comes to realize that for as long as one is alive, experience is always there, and one doesn't have to do anything in order for it to be so. And this is where the real purpose of a meditation technique becomes apparent: one is after a particular type of experience (regarded as more desirable and lofty) as a form of replacement or escape from another type of experience (regarded as undesirable and unpleasant). "I want to experience this, I don't want to experience that (or lack-of-this). Thus, all one is trying to do is experience pleasant by directly displacing unpleasant, i.e. one wants to fulfill one's immediate desire. For as long as one remains concerned and puts value on the particulars of an experience, the nature of it will remain unknown. This is the reason why any meditation of this kind is a meditation that is utterly within the sensual domain and cannot go beyond it, which is what MN 108 (iii, 14) refers to.

20 People themselves might often struggle to reconcile the nature of meditation techniques with the nature of the Buddha's Teaching, but they usually end up ignoring this because it feels like the immediate application of a technique is helping them and makes them feel better. The problem with this is that they, as puthujjanas, have no criteria to determine what "helpful" really is. Thus, they just end up following their own feelings and assumptions again, but this time on the pretext of Buddhism and spiritual practice.

21 One can be ignorant of the phenomenological nature only because that nature is there, present.

22 Cf. my essay Not Perceiving the Feeling (Meanings, p. 43) where I said that it is the feeling that feels, perception that perceives and thought that thinks (I am paraphrasing).

23 This is a type of structural indifference and this can be understood in terms of the superimposition of the respective domains of body (matter) and thoughts. Both of these domains are simultaneously present, but they don't interfere – they are “indifferent” to each other. Furthermore, it is not just that they don't interfere, it is that they cannot interfere, even if one is to want it. This principle actually applies to the whole experience, namely: the five aggregates. Crossing from one domain into another is structurally inconceivable, but as long as one does not fully understand that, by not-understanding one conceives it. For more on this cf. my essays The Infinity of the Mind and Not Perceiving the Feeling (Meanings, p. 39 and p.43).

24 And this very indifference was obscured through the assumption of ‘body’ (i.e. matter) in one's thoughts. Cf. Resistance and Designation (Meanings, p. 47).

25 “Bhikkhus, I say that the destruction of the taints occurs in dependence on the first jhāna...” – AN 9:36.

AJAHN CHAH AND THE ORIGINAL MIND

by Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

Ven. Thaniyo: This is another talk by Ajahn Chah called “The Path to Peace.” Now, this is just a few paragraphs from it that I found interesting. In this talk, Ajahn Chah gives a complete outline of the practice. It's about the middle of the talk that I'll begin from:

“At a certain point in the practice, you see that it is the mind which gives orders to the body. The body has to depend on the mind before it can function. However, the mind itself is constantly subject to different objects contacting and conditioning it before it can have any effect on the body. As you continue to turn attention inwards and reflect on the Dhamma, the wisdom faculty gradually matures, and eventually, you are left contemplating the mind and mind-objects, which means that you start to experience the body, rūpadhamma, as arūpadhamma, formless. Through your insight, you're no longer uncertain in your understanding of the body and the way it is. The mind experiences the body's physical characteristics as arūpadhamma or formless objects, which come into contact with the mind. Ultimately, you're contemplating just the mind and mind-objects—those objects which come into your consciousness. Now, examining the true nature of the mind, you can observe that in its natural state, it has no preoccupations or issues prevailing upon it. It's like a piece of cloth or a flag that has been tied to the end of a pole—as long as it's on its own and undisturbed, nothing will happen to it. A leaf on a tree is another example. Ordinarily, it remains quiet and unperturbed. If it moves or flutters, this must be due to the wind, an external force. Normally, nothing much happens to leaves—they remain still. They don't go looking to get involved with anything or anybody. When they start to move, it must be due to the influence of something external, such

as the wind, which makes them swing back and forth. It's a natural state. The mind is the same. In it, there exists no loving or hating, nor does it seek to blame other people. It is independent, existing in a state of purity that is truly clear, radiant and untarnished. In its pure state, the mind is peaceful, without happiness or suffering—indeed, not experiencing any feeling at all. This is the true state of the mind.”

Ven. Nyanamoli: That's nothing other than seeing things arise as phenomena, appear as phenomena, which they already are, because phenomena, i.e. dhammā, are the objects of the mind, of mano, as a sense. Most people in their day-to-day life don't even see that because they're too absorbed with the sense world, and usually, that then results in all the views as well. That's why it's so common to have the assumption of the external public world that “we inhabit”—the world that is independent of our experience, the “material” world; but you fail to see that even your assumption of “material” is actually a phenomenon arisen on the level of your thought, on the level of the dhammā, on the level of the image in your mind. And that's usually how people go about in their day-to-day life: not even seeing the mind, the field where these phenomena appear. So they've no signs of it, no recognition of it. So then everything revolves around the assumptions of the material world, interpretations based on that and so on.

Again, in itself, it's still on the level of phenomena, but the only difference is the person's completely unaware of it; but a person can become aware of it. So once you start recognizing that your own body—no matter how material it is or how material it might “feel”—it still can only be known as such because it has arisen on the level of that mind. And in that sense, you realize “This, in a way, has nothing to do with this matter that I'm thinking of, this matter that I assume; it's the opposite way: the matter that I think of and assume is only intelligible because the thing is still there in the level of that mind as a phenomenon,” and that's what Ajahn Chah referred to as arūpa, non-material. But even a material thing is known as such only because that phenomenon has arisen on the level of your mind, which is non-material. So that's what he meant when he said the mind is the one that governs and precedes these things structurally.

A person now might start thinking: “So I must find the immaterial” or something like that. The arūpa that Ajahn Chah refers to—the phenomenal nature of things—is within the material that you're perceiving. It's not that you must abandon or deny or get rid of the material or stop thinking it in order to see the immaterial: you just have to discern it properly whereby you know that the arisen experience of the material body right here, right now, is an image in your mind already. And that's these two tiers of existence, so to speak. Two domains: the simultaneous presence of the material domain and the mental domain. Material is inconceivable without the mental designation of it—without the mental phenomenon being there simultaneously present; but, in the same manner, there would be nothing present as a phenomenon on the level of the mental domain if the actual physical rūpa is not there, still alive. So nāmarūpa determines viññāna, and viññāna determines nāmarūpa to the same extent, like the simile of the two reeds supporting each other: you can't separate them, you can't investigate them independent of each other—one implies the other. That's just how it works. But in practical terms, the way the experience proliferates, with lack of sense restraint, sensuality and views, you drift away from that phenomenal side of things that's simultaneously there: you drift away from your mind. That's why the Buddha said it's hard to see the mind correctly for what it is. That's why it's a prerequisite for sotāpatti—seeing the signs of your mind, seeing the domain of

the phenomenal, phenomenological, whatever you want to call it—because for most people that’s completely overlooked.

Ven. Thaniyo: Do they go directly into the senses?

Ven. Nyanamoli: Yes. Usually, the entire attention gets absorbed, even if you don’t necessarily proliferate it or are not wild and unrestrained—just naturally—not discerning your mind means automatically over-discerning that which comes from the senses, which then influences all the views that you have on account of it, which is the public material world independent of my experience, science, scientific measure and data as the objective value. Again, independent of your experience, failing to see that you cannot even conceive those things unless they are your experience.

Ven. Thaniyo: For example, thinking: “When I die, this world will continue.”

Ven. Nyanamoli: Exactly. All the wrong views can be boiled down to the two fundamental points: “when I die the world will continue” or “when I die I will continue, not the world.” Either way, it’s this external projection of your experience as a whole, which is wrong, not because some higher authority told you it is, but because it’s a contradiction in terms. How can you even know something external of your experience if that’s not already experienced? Which means, then, it’s not external to your experience.

Parts of your experience present themselves based on your ignorance as if they were independent of your experience, but you’re experiencing it, and that’s a contradiction in terms. That’s why attavāda is one of the first contradictions to go when you get the Right View: the assumption of the external sense of self, independent of this experience. And that will go when you realize that no matter how external it might feel, it’s still experienced, which means it’s still internal in that manner. So it doesn’t matter how material, how objective it is: the notion of objectivity, the notion of materiality is on the level of the phenomenon persisting in your mind that gives it its meaning. That’s why things are significant and determined by the mind. That’s why the mind is the forerunner—as the Buddha would say in the Dhammapada (verse 1 and 2)—the forerunner of all things: without the mind giving it its determination to these things, there would be no experience; but now if you say “it’s all in the mind”, that’s not true either because that mind wouldn’t be there mirroring the phenomena if the matter is not there to be mirrored in the first place, if the four great elements are not there.

Ven. Thaniyo: And it shows that inaccessibility of that matter to you.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Exactly. The only way you can access it is the indirect experience of it, which is not it, it exists because of it.

Ven. Thaniyo: And that’s anicca?

Ven. Nyanamoli: Exactly. That’s why the Mūlapariyāya Sutta (MN 1) talks about that conceiving: “He conceives in matter,... apart from matter,... thinks matter is mine,” and so on. He develops all these attitudes

towards that which is matter, failing to see that he can only experience his experience of matter, not the matter—so his perception can only perceive perception, his feeling can only feel feelings, his intentions can only intend intentions—because assuming that you’re perceiving the genuine rūpa means you are actually accessing that external world of the four mahābhūta (the four great elements) and that’s inconceivable. Hence, the slightest of those assumptions as described in the Mūlapariyāya Sutta means that there is a conceiving of “I am.” There is a conceiving of a separate entity that’s independent and objective from the experience as a whole. That’s why the Buddha referred to the four great elements, saying: “they cease to find footing”—they don’t cease to be wherever they are, but they stop finding footing in your experience. As in you stop conflating the perception that has arisen on account of the four great elements being there with the perception of the actual four great elements; but see, now, when you think: “Oh, so the four great elements are something different”, that’s also your perception on the level of your thought. So by no means of grasping—by your thought, by your intentions—can you actually ever enter the domain of the four great elements. So you realize all you have to do is stop misconceiving it. That’s how it will stop finding the footing, not by finding it where it is and removing it and so on: just stop making the mistake of thinking that you can relate to it. And you will keep making the mistake of relating to it for as long as you hold your sense of self dearly because the relations with the world are the direct result and also direct fuel for the sense of self.

So, if you’re willing to let go of that sense of self, you will then have no reason to keep maintaining this gratuitous assumption of the world external to you because the only reason you do that maintenance is that that’s how you maintain your sense of self.

Ven. Thaniyo: What about, as Ajahn Chah is saying, “the state of the mind”?

Ven. Nyanamoli: If you start recognizing that no amount of materiality or objectivity can be found elsewhere except on the basis of the mind, you realize the mind is the gateway—it doesn’t matter what comes your way through your senses, good or bad, threatening or agreeable and friendly—the mind is the basis, and in itself, on that basis of the mind, things are quite indifferent. It’s your own attitude, then, towards what comes through the mind, by not seeing that you want to deal with it, prevent it, want more of it, indulge in sensuality, engage in ill-will: because you don’t see that you don’t need to go and chase these things out there; because even the assumption of “out there” can only be known as such on the level of the phenomenon of your mind, which means, you realize: “What if I just know it as a persisting, enduring phenomenon right here, right now? I don’t need to go anywhere, I just stay with this framework.” And then there will be no overly delighting or trying to deny it to get rid of it, which means equanimity will be a natural result.

Ven. Thaniyo: That’s what is there anyway, without “you”.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Absolutely. The mind and the body are there without “you”. They don’t need your sense of self. So that’s why you can develop equanimity. Because things, in themselves, are equanimous: they’re indifferent to you. It’s your own passion and confusion—and passion that comes out of that confusion—that confuses that whole thing; but if you stop fueling that passion, confusion disappears,

which means, then, equanimity is restored because all you have is things that have arisen and persist, and that's it. It has nothing to do with you.

Ven. Thaniyo: I'll continue with Ajahn Chah's talk, "The Path to Peace." He continues:

"The purpose of practice, then, is to seek inwardly, searching and investigating until you reach the Original Mind. The Original Mind is also known as the Pure Mind. The Pure Mind is the mind without attachment."

Ven. Nyanamoli: That's what I just said. You find the phenomena there, and you realize the phenomena, the way they have arisen in that mind, are already indifferent, already non-polluted by passion and lust, and they can't really be polluted. Your actions can be polluted by desire and lust, but the persisting phenomenon is still the way it has arisen, which means it's impenetrable to your assumptions, your cravings, your attachments. That's why it needs constant maintenance: it can never really get settled in these things that you're attached to or trying to get rid of or whatever, it's only an attitude in regard to it; but the thing in itself remains completely indifferent. So you recognize that that true indifference, true equanimity comes from the things—the way they have arisen—and you have no say, even if you want to have a say.

Ven. Thaniyo: That's the original state.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Exactly. And then you realize: "Things were always like this, in a way. It was because I did not know that they were this way that I kept assuming them to be different."

Ven. Thaniyo: Ajahn Chah said further:

"The Pure Mind is the mind without attachment. It doesn't get affected by mind-objects. In other words, it doesn't chase after the different kinds of pleasant and unpleasant mind-objects. Rather, the mind is in a state of continuous knowing and wakefulness, thoroughly mindful of all it's experiencing. When the mind is like this, no pleasant or unpleasant mind-objects it experiences will be able to disturb it. The mind doesn't become anything. In other words, nothing can shake it. Why? Because there is awareness. The mind knows itself as pure. It has evolved its own true independence, has reached its original state. How is it able to bring this original state into existence? Through the faculty of mindfulness wisely reflecting and seeing that all things are merely conditions arising out of the influence of elements, without any individual being controlling them."

Ven. Nyanamoli: The mind gives the meaning, gives the significance, simultaneously, to the present material domain; but without the material domain, there would be nothing manifesting in the mind. It's the two reeds simile holding each other: it's the "dyad", as the Buddha referred to it. And that's the experience as a whole, back and front. That's it. Wherever you look, it's within these two bases that are mutually determined.

There is no room for your sense of self, for your ownership, for your mastery. Or rather, your sense of ownership, as it is now, is within that, which means it's determined by that basis independent of your sense of self. And the sense of self, that's not in your own control... Well, that's not your self, then, is it? Because sense of self implicitly declares ownership, mastery over experience. That's why it's my self, my own self. So you realize that your own self depends upon this basis that you've no say in, and that's how your own self is not yours. You realize the basis that's not my self, that cannot be my self, determines this sense of self, and it's, because of that, not my self. You actually learn how to perceive not-self with not-self, and that's what the Buddha was talking about in those various Suttas.

When Ajahn Chah talks about the "Original Mind", again, you can mystify that: you can think "Oh, it's this pure bright mind that you just have to tap into." No, the "Original Mind" is right in front of you where your thoughts are, where these appearances are. The way things arise, you realize they have arisen on their own to that extent, and you've no say in that. And that is that "originality" of it: it's not your mastery, your creation of those same things. You realize you can only appropriate things to be "mine" because they were given beforehand: they've arisen on their own so you appropriate them. You realize you can't even create anything in that sense; but it's not like a delay—it's not like things have arisen and then you don't see them—it's the simultaneous presence of these things enduring and your ownership of that endurance, but you want to realize that that endurance cannot be owned, that's why you stop owning things. You can't stop owning things by trying to destroy them, get rid of them and say no to everything: you can stop owning them by realizing that your ownership cannot belong to you. Hence, it's not ultimate ownership.

That is the "Original", the "Pure Mind", as Ajahn Chah said, that there is no room for anyone there, in a way, means exactly that: inasmuch as the mind gives a significance and recognition—it allows matter to manifest on its basis—to that same extent without that matter, there would be nothing for the mind to discern; so the matter is the measure of the extent of the mind, and the mind determines the extent of the appeared matter, and whichever way you look, it's going to be determined by the other. So "I am independent of this" becomes inconceivable to even assume, but in order to see this correctly, a person has to stop just focusing on things in front of them because these two levels I talk about, that Ajahn Chah talks about, they're not in front of you as two objects. Only one can be in front of you. The other one is always behind from where you look, and that's what we spoke about in other talks: "the peripheral."

Learning how to see things peripherally without directly looking at them because that's where the mind is, that's where phenomena are. But what you see in front of you is the objects of your senses. That's why people are naturally, with the grain, automatically absorbed with the world and senses and chasing pleasures: it actually takes effort to learn how to see the context behind it, how to develop that peripheral vision without needing to turn away and look at it because it won't be peripheral then. Like, I'm looking at you now, and I've all these things peripheral to me, and they will remain peripheral if I keep looking at you, but if I start looking at that... Well, that's not peripheral anymore. Now that's the actual thing right in front of me. And that's the point that you must keep in mind when you try to discern what Ajahn Chah's describing here. Rūpa is what you're staring at, arūpa would be everything around it. You want to learn how to see arūpa as arūpa; you want to see the peripheral as peripheral.

By the way, rūpa and arūpa are not quite used in this sense in the Suttas, but Ajahn Chah used it on a practical level, and there's nothing wrong with that.

Ven. Thaniyo: So I'll continue with the talk:

“This is how it is with the happiness and suffering we experience. When these mental states arise, they're just happiness and suffering. There's no owner of the happiness. The mind is not the owner of the suffering—mental states do not belong to the mind. Look at it for yourself. In reality, these are not affairs of the mind, they're separate and distinct. Happiness is just the state of happiness; suffering is just the state of suffering.”

Ven. Nyanamoli: Any phenomenon is a phenomenon in itself; that's why it's independent of you. That's why the Suttas say: “He knows the mind affected with lust as mind affected with lust.” It's not like “me affected with lust.” There is lust present; there is non-lust present. There is happiness present; there is sadness present. It's enduring inasmuch as sights are enduring, sounds are enduring and so on. Anything that manifests, that is its nature: to be manifested. That's it. So even if it's a weird, ambiguous thought, it's real as such: as the experience of an ambiguous thought. But it's our own expectation of “concreteness” which is fueled by that assumption of “material, public concreteness”, so to speak, —the world independent of me— that prevents you from seeing the mind, seeing the phenomena, seeing the Dhamma. That's why dhammā means, literally, “phenomena”. And then the Dhamma is the teaching of the knowledge of the phenomena, of that which manifests.

Ven. Thaniyo: It's right there.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Yes, it cannot be anywhere else. So it's learning how to see it correctly.

Ven. Thaniyo: Ajahn Chah says:

“You are merely the knower of these things. In the past, because the roots of greed, hatred, and delusion already existed in the mind, whenever you caught sight of the slightest pleasant or unpleasant mind-object, the mind would react immediately—you would take hold of it and have to experience either happiness or suffering. You would be continuously indulging in states of happiness and suffering. That's the way it is as long as the mind doesn't know itself—as long as it's not bright and illuminated. The mind is not free. It is influenced by whatever mind-objects it experiences. In other words, it is without a refuge, unable to truly depend on itself. You receive a pleasant mental impression and get into a good mood. The mind forgets itself. In contrast, the original mind is beyond good and bad. This is the original nature of the mind. If you feel happy over experiencing a pleasant mind-object, that is delusion. If you feel unhappy over experiencing an unpleasant mind-object, that is delusion. Unpleasant mind-objects make you suffer and pleasant ones make you happy—this is the world. Mind-objects come with the world. They are the world. They give rise to happiness and suffering, good and evil, and everything that is subject to impermanence and uncertainty. When you separate from the original mind, everything becomes uncertain—there is just unending birth and death, uncertainty and apprehensiveness, suffering and hardship.”

Ven. Nyanamoli: Yes, and you're separated from the "Original Mind"—you're separated from that domain of phenomena, you don't see them as phenomena—when you never restrain your actions in regard to your senses. The threshold of the being you are used to is on the level of the senses and the pleasure or pain that comes from it. That's why many people would have the implicit attitude that even their own thoughts don't really exist, are not real: because the expectation of reality has been proliferated so far out.

Going back to that "Original Mind", as Ajahn Chah says, is not some hidden reality behind all these appearances: it's actually stopping to misconceive the appearances for what they're not, and that is its original state. It was always there. That's why arahantship is possible in the first place. That's why undoing of the wrong conceiving is possible: because these things are truly independent of whether you conceive them or not. So that's why the sense of self is a problem: because it's a contradiction in terms. "Self" means mastery, ownership, rulership of your experience. Yet you can only rule that which was given to you beforehand, which means you're not the ruler then because if you were the true creator, master, ruler of these things, you would have been creating it, you would have been truly independent of it. But your whole existence depends on these things still being there so that you can maintain your ownership in regard to it; but when that thing decides to go, and it will—that's why the Buddha encouraged reflecting on the four great elements, how they change—you realize it's inconceivable that you would still exist in your domain of ownership. So, that's not ownership then, and you realize the only way to maintain that sense of ownership of things around you is to ignore the fact that you cannot actually own it. That's why people don't want to think about death naturally—don't want to think about losing their loved ones, losing things they care about—because it's implicit that it will happen, so it just reminds them of the obvious. So you stop being ignorant by making an effort to not ignore things. That's it. Because ignoring things is effortless. It's with the grain of sensuality, the grain of ignorance; not ignoring takes effort. But not ignoring is not like "resolving some mystery of the universe." You just need to stop ignoring the very things that are in front of you: stop ignoring the broader context; stop ignoring the peripheral to the actual; stop trying to get rid of the states of mind you don't like or that "should have not arisen."

Ven. Thaniyo: You can just look at "mind-objects."

Ven. Nyanamoli: Yes. That's what we do when we do the questioning, asking: "How am I feeling right now, fundamentally? Is it OK or is it not OK?" And you realize you find that a state there enduring, and you have no say in it. You may have lots of joy now because you feel OK, or you have a bit of a pressure and unpleasant feeling because you don't feel OK, but that fundamental bit of whether it's OK or not OK has arisen on its own. Feeling has been manifested to its own extent, and you have no say in that. That's why I compare it to the weather that comes and goes. You will act differently when the weather's bad, you'll act differently when the weather's good. In the same way, you'll act differently when there is a pleasant feeling than when there is an unpleasant feeling, but that in itself is not necessarily the problem until your actions delude you into believing that they are the controller of the weather: they are the controller of the feelings. And that's why the Buddha would ask that person in that Sutta: "Well, if the feeling is truly yours (as in you're the controller), which one is it then?" because they keep coming and going. Good feelings, bad feelings, neutral feelings, but if you were truly the owner, you would only have good feelings because

ownership and pleasure go hand in hand. That's why you want to undermine that pleasure, not by trying to get rid of it, but seeing that it cannot actually be yours—it hasn't come from you. That's how you also undermine the ownership.

COMPREHENDING THE MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING AND DEATH CONTEMPLATION

by Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

I. Mindfulness of Breathing

Ven. Thaniyo: I wanted to ask about mindfulness of breathing, and how that should be done. You can read the sutta over and over again and try to follow some sort of method, step-by-step. "You breathe in, then you breathe out. I'll breathe in, thinking about my body."

Ven. Nyanamoli: "I attend to this, I attend to that. I do this, I do that."

Ven. Thaniyo: And you can actually run through all those steps forward, backward, however you want...

Ven. Nyanamoli: And still not do the mindfulness of breathing.

Ven. Thaniyo: So what is best to do?

Ven. Nyanamoli: Well, as the name itself says, it's mindfulness—mindfulness of breathing. In order to do mindfulness of breathing, you need to know what mindfulness is.

Ven. Thaniyo: So, what is mindfulness?

Ven. Nyanamoli: Mindfulness, if done rightly, is effortless. Mindfulness is not something you can do.

Mindfulness is something you discern on account of the presently enduring things——experience as a whole, that includes feelings, body, etc. There are many different ways you can establish mindfulness, but the principle of mindfulness is the same. It's to be discerned.

So what is it that you discern in order to become mindful? Well, for example, you discern your presently enduring situation. So you have an option: you can be absorbed with the presently enduring situation—something can take 100% of your attention, i.e. you're dealing with this problem or looking at this or doing that; but including self-awareness into whatever you're doing, that's already a step closer to the proper mindfulness. And that's not something you can do, it's more like an attitude you can have in regard to things you do. That's why, fundamentally, a meditation "method" is inherently wrong from the point of view of mindfulness—because you can't be doing the mindfulness. Yet, as the Buddha said, meditation is nothing other than the unshakeable, imperturbable establishment of mindfulness. So if you're not doing mindfulness from the start, how can you magically establish it through something you do, some methods or repetitions? It's a recognition of your situation while at the same time, simultaneously with that recognition, you are in the situation. In other words, you can be sitting on a chair now, and with a corner of your eye, with the back of your mind, you're aware of that. That doesn't mean you need to stand up or lay down or start walking in order to know that you were seated on the chair. That's why the bodily postures or just awareness of the body is so fundamental. So mindfulness done properly means, basically, awareness of your situation, whether it's established upon the body or feelings or the state of minds (moods), it's established in that background, so you're not attending it. I don't have to keep sitting here thinking: "I'm seated... I'm seated... I'm seated". I don't need to keep repeating that to myself. Why? Because I already know that I'm

seated, even if I don't think about it. So if you were to ask me "what's your body posture?", I'll immediately say "I'm seated". And that's what you want to tap into, so to speak. The proper development of mindfulness is tapping into what you already know. It's not doing what you think you must be doing. "I'm seated... I'm seated... I'm feeling the chair... I'm feeling the chair... My legs are folded... I'm feeling the floor". That's all a result of you already knowing that you're seated, that's not your sitting. In other words, whether you're attending to your feet, your back or whatever else is going on while you're seated, that's secondary to the fact that you're already seated, and you already know that you're seated. So instead of giving in to that thinking of "I'm doing this... I'm doing this"—almost like exercising your sense of control over your meditation technique—you want to recognize that you already know what you're doing, and then just try not to forget that little bit, that one percent, that one grain. Don't forget what you already know, which means you don't need the active effort of reminding yourself that you're seated. All you need to do is just keep a corner of your eye on the fact that you already know that you're seated. And how do you know? Because you're seated. So that knowledge doesn't come from you, it's just a recognition of how things are. That's why through that mindfulness you learn how to discern how things are. That's why that type of mindfulness will result in discerning impermanence, suffering, lack of control... all of that. But it won't result in that if you do it on your own terms, which is thinking: "This is what I'm doing, this is my meditation... I'm touching... feeling... sitting". That's basically you doing what you think you should be doing, but the fact is that a puthujjana already starts with a wrong view, which means whatever he thinks he should be doing, he will be doing it with a wrong view. That's why you can't have too much mindfulness either—because it's not doing. It's the recognition of what you already know, and that knowledge is not on you.

The same applies in regard to body postures or in regard to the presently enduring feeling. Again, that's something you already know, so if I ask you how do you feel, you might think about how you feel in this particular regard, but if I ask you how do you feel overall—Is it OK? How is your mood, generally?—you'll immediately know whether it's "plus" or "minus", so to speak. Whether it's OK or whether it isn't OK, whether it's neither. So it's tapping into what you already know, and you already know it because it's present on its own terms. Feeling is there enduring, whichever it is. And it's because of you not keeping a corner of your eye on what you already know that you get distracted, pulled by sensuality, ill-will, reacting, causing more trouble for yourself, all these things.

That's why people are afraid to be alone as well, because they're dependent on something to take away their attention, have something to attend to, including their meditation technique, and they don't stay with what they already know because it's frightening. Initially, at least. If you were to just not do anything, including your meditation technique, the pressure is going to start building up. It is about solitude, not doing anything. Doing is required for the maintenance of your being. That's why many people depend on activities of all sorts. Yes, you can have a good activity, bad activity, less bad activity, but overall, you depend on the activity. But mindfulness is not an activity! That's why you cannot have too much of it, and that's why you can actually develop wisdom on account of it if you start discerning it rightly. And that's why you need to know what mindfulness is in order to do it rightly, not just saying: "OK, I'm mindful now". You can't start perfectly, you can't start rightly from the beginning, but you can certainly arrive at it if you don't take for granted what you think mindfulness is as mindfulness. You realize: if I were to know what mindfulness is, I would have at least the Right View. I would be at least a sotāpanna. So if I'm not a

sotāpanna, that means I don't quite know what mindfulness is, so whatever I think mindfulness is, I must upgrade. Through that, I must discern it further. Either way, it's a win-win. If you already know what mindfulness is, great. Doing more of it cannot bring any harm. If you don't know what mindfulness is, and then you end up doing more, and you understand what mindfulness is, you win again. So you've nothing to lose by regarding yourself as not knowing quite what mindfulness is, or by investigating further.

The only thing you have to lose is your vanity and conceit that made you believe you already understood it, and that it's already helpful, already works and so on. Because if it does, you wouldn't have a problem upgrading it or pushing it further. Because if it truly works, it will stand that test—nothing will happen to it. But the fact that some people might be defending their meditation technique and get very touchy over it or over their practice of mindfulness means there's passion invested in it—there's conceit and vanity invested in it. And that's not mindfulness, then.

Now that we clarified what mindfulness is, we come to mindfulness of breathing. You can do the breathing, but you can't do the "mindfulness" in "mindfulness of breathing". In other words, saying mindfulness of breathing means knowledge of breathing, knowledge of the act of breathing. And that's why the Buddha says in that sutta, "Knowingly he breaths in, knowingly he breaths out", that's what his mindfulness is. It's on that level of that discernment of what's already there. You want to be mindful of an activity, of something you do. What is the neutral activity that your body does whether you want it or not? It's breathing in, breathing out. So you want to be aware of the background of your act of breathing in and breathing out. In other words, you don't want to be attending to your breath directly—you want to make it become a background of whatever your mind is thinking. So you're mindful of breathing. Or you can even bring it to the foreground if you want, but again, not in a sense of thinking "I'm perceiving my breath..." or keep repeating "Nostrils... Nostrils...". Not like that. It still has to be on the level of that knowledge, because if I ask you now "Are you breathing?", you will know that you are. You don't have to stop breathing to give me the answer, you can't even doubt whether you're breathing or not. You already know that you're breathing. That's what you want to learn through the mindfulness of breathing—recognition of what you already know.

And that's not something you always have to maintain, or even can maintain 100% in front of you, thinking "I'm breathing... I'm breathing...". Let it drift away without losing sight of it. So, here you are, sitting, semi-comfortably (not too comfortably because you'll fall asleep), wide awake, eyes open, and you're breathing. And now know that you know that you're breathing. That's it. There is no "What do I do next?". Nothing. So there is the in-breath, there is the out-breath... there is the in-breath... Either way, they all stand within that knowledge of "I am breathing".

Whether it's a particular in-breath or a particular out-breath, the knowledge of breathing remains the same. That's why, then, the Buddha would say "He would breathe in like this, or like this... Short breath or long breath..." Point being, the knowledge of that breathing still stays the same—mindfulness gets established, regardless of the type of breath or how different it is.

And it's the same principle with mindfulness of the body. When the Buddha would say "he's mindful of the body like this (standing, sitting, laying down, etc.), or he's mindful to the extent necessary for final

knowledge that ‘body is there’”. As in the ultimate background of any of your activities is the background of your body being present there as a basis on account of which you can do all these activities and engagements—feel feelings, perceive perceptions and so on. So if your mind never forgets that 0.01% of what it already knows of that body being a necessary basis for it, your mind cannot give rise to *avijjā*, whether you recognize it at that time or not doesn’t matter—you’re doing it rightly. If you’re doing it rightly, the time will come when you’ve done it rightly sufficiently that you recognize what you’ve been doing rightly.

That’s also another reason why nobody can accidentally stumble upon the Right View. It takes repetition of something you took either through intellectual discernment or on faith, but you’ve been doing it rightly, and when you’ve been doing it rightly sufficiently, then you recognize right as right, which is the basic definition of *sotāpanna*. “He knows *kusala* as *kusala* and *akusala* as *akusala*”. But he wouldn’t have arrived at it if he hadn’t been doing it rightly on account of the utterance of another and his own faith in it and rightly understanding it on that intellectual level.

Mindfulness of breathing is the same principle of mindfulness. Breathing is there. Whether it’s a short breath, long breath, quick breath, slow breath...—breathing is there. And that’s what you know. In a way, breathing is doing, but knowledge of breathing is not doing. Why would the Buddha then say doing? Because sometimes you want to do something. You want to replace coarse doing with refined doing. You want to replace unwholesome doing with wholesome doing, and breathing, being the most neutral type of doing, is the wholesome doing you can do, because it’s just neutral. Doesn’t harm anyone, doesn’t harm you, doesn’t harm others. You can develop mindfulness, you can develop knowledge of that neutral type of doing. And it’s also repetitive, which means it doesn’t require your attention as when you’re solving a task or doing some menial work or whatever. It’s just breathing—it happens whether you think about it or not. So you want to discern it on the level of doing, but discern it, not do it yourself. And how do you do that? Start breathing, secluded, alone. And ask yourself “Am I breathing right now? Yes.” That’s already an increment in the right direction of that knowledge—you already know you’re breathing. Are you still breathing? Yes. So you still know you’re breathing—same breathing, same knowledge. So you have the same thing enduring now. Now you don’t even have to ask yourself whether you’re breathing—you just remind yourself of what you already know. Yes, you are still breathing. So you can stop saying “still”, you can just say “Yes, I’m breathing”. You don’t even have to say it, you can’t think it. When you become familiar with that, as in knowing that right now, you’re still breathing, you can then look within that.

For example, noticing that the breath is quite slow right now, and you already know that. You’re not doing it, you’re discerning what’s being done. Well, you can do it, but you realize that you doing it is secondary to the discernment of what’s being done, and that’s incidentally how you also overcome the nature of action, how you disown it, but let’s not complicate things here. Ask yourself: are you still breathing? You are. All this time you had the same mindfulness of the same breathing. Particularly the breath kept going in, going out, but overall, breathing is there. Body sits, body stands up, body goes, body lays down—body is there. That’s why *ānāpānasāti* results in the four foundations of mindfulness being brought to fulfillment, as the Buddha said. It doesn’t result in mystical experiences of meditative lights and whatnot. It results in clarity of mindfulness. Clarity of mindfulness results in the Four Right Strivings, the Four Right strivings in the Enlightenment Factors, and that’s it. No other work for you to be done. Why? Because you brought that knowledge of the nature of things to fulfillment.

Ven. Thaniyo: To the fore.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Well, yes. So bringing mindfulness of breathing to the fore means thinking: “OK, am I breathing now? Yes”. Then you ask yourself: “Am I still aware that I am breathing now? Yes. How am I breathing now? Medium-pace.” You can designate it if you want, there is no right answer to it. There’s only right direction or wrong direction, as in there is only knowledge of it or non-knowledge of it. Ask yourself: “By the way, how am I feeling while I’m breathing right now? Overall, fundamentally pleasant. But am I still breathing? Yes.” So your mindfulness is still “concerned” or “anchored”, for the lack of a better word, in the act of breathing. Then you think: “What are the thoughts that keep popping up in my mind while I’m breathing?” With the same breathing, same mindfulness, same knowledge of the same breathing. Maybe you’re thinking about how long you can do this, what you do next and so on. Ask yourself, are those thoughts pleasant or unpleasant? All of this while you’re breathing. You didn’t stop breathing while you were thinking all of this. You haven’t lost sight of the breath as the basis of all these things. Then you recognize, for example, “I’m feeling doubtful...” Or whatever you discover, as I said, there is no right answer, there is only losing the sight of your breathing, or not losing it. Then you might stop thinking about it, and ask yourself: “What’s the state of my mind while I’m breathing? Am I depressed, am I elated, am I happy, am I sad? What is my mood?” While you’re breathing in and breathing out—all this time. And there you go. You don’t need to do anything else when it comes to mindfulness of breathing. Just keep doing that, because you’ll be developing mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of mind and mindfulness of thoughts, which are the Satipaṭṭhāna. Which is why the Ānāpānasati Sutta says that—fulfillment of ānāpānasati brings the fulfillment of satipaṭṭhāna. Nothing else.

Ven. Thaniyo: It also says that you get rid of distracting thoughts.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Exactly, because they’re all rooted in losing the sight of that peripheral—in losing mindfulness, basically. Not being anchored in the recognition of what’s peripherally enduring.

Ven. Thaniyo: The background.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Exactly, that’s lust, aversion... That is a necessary basis for lust, aversion, and distraction to arise—losing sight of what you already know, i.e. that certain feelings, body, intentions, perceptions, etc. are enduring there on their own in that background. And you actively choose to ignore them. That’s why everybody’s fully responsible for their greed, aversion, and delusion. It’s not accidental, it’s maintained through your consciously-made decisions. Not that you fully understand the decisions you’re making, but you are making them. You choose to go down sensuality, you choose to go down the ill-will—you choose to not say no to those things, including distraction. That’s why all someone who understands that needs to do is stop delighting in it. He doesn’t stop thinking sensual thoughts or bad thoughts, but he stops delighting in them. That’s how you stop thinking them. Not by preventing them from arising, but by not fueling them further. If you’re just mindful: “I’m seated... I’m seated...”, you’re not doing anything. So you could fall asleep or you could get easily distracted. But breathing is something that’s done, which means it’s more active. Yet, at the same time, the principle of mindfulness is not compromised because it doesn’t really take away your attention. On the basis of knowing that breathing is there, you can discern what kind of breathing is there. On the basis of knowing that breathing is there, you can discern what feeling is there. On the basis of knowing that breathing is there, you can discern what mood is there. On the basis of knowing that breathing is there, you can discern what exactly your mind is thinking right now—particular thoughts of this or that. So on the basis of doing things, you’re discerning what’s present. You develop that, that means there will be less and less chances of being distracted even when you’re not practicing actively in meditation.

Whether you're sweeping leaves, walking, sitting, extending your limbs, that mindfulness pertains to it. Because, again, you don't necessarily have to think "I'm breathing... I'm breathing...", because you already know you're breathing. So you just learn, basically, how to tap into that point of view of that breathing being already there—of that body being already there—which automatically is something that is not your point of view, because you are not doing it.

Ven. Thaniyo: You could say it comes before your point of view...?

Ven. Nyanamoli: Well, it comes before your appropriation of the point of view through action. As in when you think: "I'm looking at this, I'm doing this, that's my point of view". But the only reason you're able to do that is because these things are there on their own enduring already—body is there, feelings are there, perceptions are there, intentions are there, pretty much. So, again, there are no steps to mindfulness of breathing—there is mindfulness of breathing and different aspects of it, of the same principle of mindfulness of breathing. I'm breathing, I'm still breathing. Still the same mindfulness, all this time since we've been talking about it. Lots of things have changed on a particular level—new thoughts, new moods, new feelings—yet that breathing is still the same. Mindfulness, knowledge of that same breathing is still there.

Ven. Thaniyo: And that breathing is a nutriment, you could say.

Ven. Nyanamoli: It's a basis, it's a reference point, an anchor—a background, basically, of everything else more particular.

Ven. Thaniyo: And one can see that eventually, at least...

Ven. Nyanamoli: Well, there is no "endgame". There is not an "and then this happens". If you just keep doing mindfulness of breathing, what's going to happen is everything inferior to it, everything more particular to it is going to be purified of greed, aversion, and delusion. It's going to be purified of the basis of non-mindfulness. Why? Because you're developing the basis of mindfulness. Through doing it, you're removing the nutriment for all the unwholesome things you've been doing and deciding to do. Mindfulness of breathing is on the level of mindfulness of death, or any other mindfulness. That's why the Buddha taught it as a replacement to Maranānussati. He said, "Instead of that, because some monks couldn't quite handle it, practice mindfulness of breathing". But it's the same goal. As in stick with the most fundamental discernment of things not being in your control, being already there enduring despite whether you want them or not, whether you do them or not. It is a death of your sense of self. Death of your activity, of the notion that you are the one who maintains things, that you're the one who's in control. That sense just gets completely pushed out, fades away.

Ven. Thaniyo: So, when to do mindfulness of death? How is that done? Where is the death that you're mindful of?

Ven. Nyanamoli: Again, start with mindfulness of the body. You start seeing the body as a necessary, organic, made out of organs, thing in the world because of you which you experience the world and everything in it. All your happiness, sadness, choices and decisions are inconceivable if the body wasn't there, simultaneously present and living. Do you have any say in that? That body that you find there—that you were given, of a certain height, certain complexion, whatever—can you make it not age? Can you prevent it from getting sick? Can you ultimately command it to never die? So those are the first three basic things that people don't dwell on. That's why the Buddha said that people are intoxicated with life, intoxicated with youth, intoxicated with health. You choose to become intoxicated by refusing to look at the obvious characteristics of it because they're unpleasant, they fill you with anxiety.

Ven. Thaniyo: So that's that inevitable possibility of death.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Yes. So once you start recognizing that the presence of the body is just a necessary nutriment for your experience as a whole, of any kind, you stop being concerned with the particulars of that experience, such as: "This bothers me... this makes me happy..." You realize that it's fundamental nature is undermined by the presence of the living body. And when that changes, none of it can remain standing a second longer—none of your feelings or things can stay. So how can they be yours? And that's basically beginning to acknowledge death—the destruction that is impending upon the body, upon the senses. Decay, fading away, disintegration. You think about that, you're going to be less and less intoxicated with things that come through it—with your sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, thoughts. Why? Because you recognize that whatever they are, they cannot step outside of the confinement of the necessary basis of this living body. You think: "Am I breathing? Yes. What position is the body in? It's seated." That seated body while you're breathing in and out right now, what are its characteristics? Just describe it in any terms to yourself. The most obvious one is it's just there, isn't it? It's living, it's just there. Do you have a say in any of those characteristics? Can you change them? Can you tell them to be otherwise? So while I'm breathing, and my body is seated, that body that I'm discerning—while the breathing is there—is independent of me, isn't it? I can use it, but I cannot uphold it—I cannot step outside of it and own it. I cannot tell it what to do. It's only borrowed, which means everything else that you get through your body is equally borrowed. And if something is borrowed, is it right for me to regard it as mine and belonging to me? No. If something is borrowed, is it right for me to grieve and be sad over it being taken away? No. You require active ignoring of the fact that you're not in control in order to grieve over it or be happy over it. Hence, mindfulness, if done rightly, results in discernment of the natural principles, which is what Dhamma is—nature. The nature of things. You could see how different that is from watching your nostrils and "belly-bhāvanā", or whatever they call it. Completely different. It's not like thinking: "I'm doing this... I'm feeling my belly rising and falling, rising and falling..." Zero discernment there. You're just trying to attend to the momentary presence of things hoping that it will magically result in knowledge. Looking for meaning results in knowledge. Delving with the knife, self-questioning, self-interrogation—all the things the Buddha talks about in the suttas—that's what results in knowledge.

II. Death Contemplation

Ven. Thaniyo: What about watching someone die?

Ven. Nyanamoli: Well, with the right attitude, sure, but not without the right attitude. Watching someone die and then seeing that your living body—right here, right now—is more related to that dying body than to your sense of ownership of your body. It's in the same domain as the other dying bodies, not in the domain of your notion of "this is my body". That's how you undermine your control, your sense of control. You can't directly choose to not control it or not own it, but you can undermine it. Hence, seeing that body is impermanent, because of that, body cannot be the reason for lust and satisfaction, automatically you experience that body as "not mine". *Sabbe saṅkhārā anicca, sabbe saṅkhārā dukkha, sabbe dhammā anattā.*

Ven. Thaniyo: So in Dependent Origination, it says "With birth, aging & death is". So this life—this manifestation of life, what I see as a whole—all that is subject to fading away.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Yes, but that doesn't need to be your "subject", or you don't need to be subjected to it. You are subjected to it because you have appropriated birth, you appropriated the given body, you appropriated the possibilities of the given body and the senses—you appropriated it by delighting in it, by pursuing pleasures that are secondary to it, that come on the basis of it. You can't engage in sensual pleasure without

appropriation of the body, it's inconceivable. So through engaging in sensual pleasure, you're responsible for your appropriation of the body. And then, you're liable to whatever that body is liable to: accidents, aging, death, sickness, all of it. Hence, it's on you, because you took it, through carelessly pursuing sensuality.

Ven. Thaniyo: The body will always age and will always die.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Yes, but if you stop regarding it as yours, it's not your problem. Inasmuch as these aging trees and other people's bodies are not your problem because they're not yours. That's why they're not your problem. It's not that they're not your problem because they're other people's. They're not your problem because you never considered other people to be yours—but, incidentally, say if it's your son, your daughter, your partner, suddenly you're emotionally affected. Why? Because they're "yours". So yes, you can appropriate other people as well. Your friends, for example. And that's why you suffer. Not because they're dying, you suffer because you appropriated them and now you're feeling that because you're liable to it. So you have a choice. If you want to be free from suffering, you have to give up all the appropriation. If you don't want to give up the appropriation, that's absolutely fine, but then you make yourself liable to suffering. Again, there is a slight contradiction there, because if you were to be honest with yourself and ask "Why don't I want to give up all the appropriations?" you would answer "Because it's unpleasant". So you're still governed by the same principle of wanting to avoid suffering. That's why people protect their attachments and appropriations—because they don't want to suffer. Ironically, you suffer because of that. If you were to take the initial hit of suffering, ultimately, you can free yourself from suffering. But if you are too weak to take the initial hit of suffering, you make yourself liable to it indefinitely. Either way, nobody wants to suffer. Even people who say "I want to suffer", they don't. They want to suffer because that provides them pleasure—because not getting that pleasure means actual suffering. That's why the Buddha himself could've not taught anything different than suffering and the cessation of it. Because that is at the root, universally, of every human, regardless of their culture, education, identity, and whatnot. That is always the basic principle—avoid pain; have pleasure. Not having enough pleasure, or getting more pleasure, means avoiding the pain of not having enough pleasure.

Ven. Thaniyo: And what do you think about the common idea where a lot of people say "I'm not afraid of death"?

Ven. Nyanamoli: Well, they're not afraid of what they think death is, which means they don't know what death is. Because only two people are not afraid of death—a fully enlightened arahant or a fully deluded puthujjana. But one of them is fully liable to death, another one is fully free from it. But they both are not afraid of it. One is not afraid due to the sheer amount of ignorance and not even knowing what death is, another is not afraid because he's completely overcome it. So unless you're an arahant, you are afraid of death. And if you don't feel the fear, it's because you're covering it up. Don't think that death is what you think death is. Think that death is basically where you can't get your pleasures, where you can't get the usage of your senses. Find the fears you have in your life, and you'll see death is at the other end of them, whatever those fears might particularly be, or whichever particular way they manifest. Whatever brings people anxiety, death is on the other side of that. If you say "I'm not afraid of death, that brings me no anxiety" it's because your idea of what death is is completely wrong. But something will be bringing you anxiety, and that's what death is, hence the anxiety.

Ven. Thaniyo: One might say: "I'm afraid of losing all my friends".

Ven. Nyanamoli: Well, there you go. Death is at the other end of that. That's just a hint of where death is. Not having anyone, being all alone, losing it all. Or simply losing things that are dear to you. Or even more

simply, as the Buddha said, being separated from the agreeable, and being united with the disagreeable. That's what suffering is. And the ultimate suffering is death. You might think: "I'm not afraid of dying, but I'm afraid of what people think about me". There you go. Death is basically not having a say in what people will think about you ultimately. That's the most frightening thing, isn't it? Well, for those who fear that. Or you might think: "I'm not afraid of dying, but I'm afraid of losing my wealth, "I'm afraid of losing my family."

Ven. Thaniyo: Or "I'm afraid of public speaking".

Ven. Nyanamoli: And you ask yourself why is that? Because it's the ultimate experience of non-control. You have control over your speaking, but you have zero control over how people will take that—what will they say? What will they think?

So, ultimately, what is the fear of death? It's fear of the ultimate non-control. And it's not incidental that one thing or the other will have to be reminding you of that, because the whole human experience is about covering the fact that you're not in control, covering the fact that you're liable to dying, inevitably liable to dying. So all these things, loss, public speaking, whatever frightens people, frightens them because it's the ultimate reminder of the cessation of any notion of control they might have. So if people say "I'm not afraid of dying", it's because that thought is in their control, and they think that's what dying is. So they're not afraid of it. They think: "Everybody dies". True. But why are you afraid of public speaking? Everybody speaks, yet here you are, terrified of public speaking. Why? Because you are constantly looking away from the fact that you're not in control. And when you encounter experiences where you cannot ignore that fact that you're not in control, it frightens the hell out of you. And that's what death is—the ultimate cessation of any ground for your notion of control that you take to be the most fundamental thing. "I am, therefore things are mine, therefore I'm in control".

Ven. Thaniyo: So anattā is basically seeing death.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Yes, seeing death, sure. Seeing death correctly means not being able to entertain the notion of control, which means not being my own self, not being my self, not belonging to me, non appropriation—that's all anattā.

Ven. Thaniyo: So if I see that for myself...

Ven. Nyanamoli: It's going to scare the hell out of you. That's what happened in the suttas. If today people are not scared when they read about anattā and nibbāna, it's because they don't have a clue what it is, what it really is. So for a puthujjana, nibbāna is closer to what death is, the one that he's ignoring. So a puthujjana, through ignoring death, actually ignores the possibility of nibbāna. That's why those people who came to the Buddha, the way the Buddha would lay it out on them, they couldn't ignore it and would fall on the ground in complete anxious despair and have a mental breakdown. Saying: "This will kill me! This will destroy me!". Because they still gratuitously assume the priority of their sense of "I am", despite the evidence showing the contrary. They think: "I'm not giving up the notion of 'I am', thus I will be destroyed." But if you hear the teaching, you realize that could have not been yours even if you wanted it to, and the only reason you were regarding it as yours is because you didn't know that it cannot be yours. And how do you find out that it cannot be yours? Through practicing mindfulness correctly and seeing that it is inseparable from the necessary basis of things that cannot be yours.

Dwelling on the characteristics of the necessity of the body, the independence of the presently enduring feeling, presently enduring perceptions, yet seeing yourself inseparable from it. That means, basically, re-molding, re-shaping, going against the grain, and forcing yourself to see that your own self depends on a basis that cannot be your self. Because if it were so, the body would not age, would not get sick and would not die. If it were so, the feelings would not change—they would always be pleasant, the way you want them to. Yet the Buddha said: “If that feeling is yours, which one is it? Why do you experience displeasure if feeling is yours?” You wouldn’t do so if you were in control. So through reminding yourself that you’re not in control—through practicing *maranānussati* correctly—you get to undermine your sense of self gradually so that you won’t freak out and have a breakdown, although some monks did, that’s why the Buddha told them to do mindfulness of breathing instead. Because if done rightly, it results in the same principles being discerned.

Ven. Thaniyo: So if you were truly unafraid of death, how would you take other people’s deaths?

Ven. Nyanamoli: Equally. Equally unafraid of it. You would not be oblivious to what’s happening, like some sort of robot who lost the significance of things. It’s still your friend dying, but no amount of the extent of that experience—perception and feeling in regard to it—can overturn your mind and make you think that which isn’t yours is, or that which isn’t permanent is. The only attitude you could possibly have is “how could it be otherwise?”. How can something that’s been born and grown not die? It’s actually insanity to think otherwise. So grieving over death is on the level of insanity. Because it’s inconceivable for somebody who understood the nature of death to think “But if only...” It just doesn’t apply. How can it be otherwise?

Ven. Thaniyo: But you have to get used to this, because I think it’d be difficult to do it while you’re dying...

Ven. Nyanamoli: Oh, good luck with that. If you’ve never done it while you were alive—if you haven’t uncovered the nature of death while you were alive—you’re not going to do it when you’re dying. It’s too late. So you want to start facing it as soon as you can. That’s why, basically, understanding of death, understanding of the ultimate non-control, means ultimately giving things up—relinquishing appropriation and assumption. That’s why understanding that fully means *nibbāna*. That’s why a *Sotāpanna*, who understood the nature of *nibbāna*, or an *ariyasāvaka* in general, is often spoken about in the suttas as “If he doesn’t attain it during his life, he attains when he’s dying”. Why? Because that’s where it comes from, the direction of dying and cessation of control. Now, if he got careless and lazy during his lifetime and hasn’t been making the effort, death will force him in the direction that he already understood. That’s why sometimes *ariyasāvaka* can become an *arahant* at the moment of dying—it’s not some mystical light that appears before you die. It’s the direction you understood through your Right View and everything else, and now you’re dragged there, and you already understood it, so you’re dragged where you should have gone while you were still alive. So it’s still good to understand it, but it’s even better to do it now and not wait to be dragged there by death, even for *ariyasāvakas*.

Ven. Thaniyo: It reminds me of that sutta that says “See as though blind”—as though you were already blind.

Ven. Nyanamoli: Right. Well, see as though you already relinquished your sight. That’s what it means. Doesn’t mean to pretend you’re blind and not seeing, because what you’re seeing was never a problem—it was because of you owning your eyes and what comes through, that you were affected by everything else that’s experienced on account of it. So if you don’t forget that the necessary basis for any sight you have is the physical organs of your eye that you’re not in control of, that will ultimately be diminished and destroyed, you cannot possibly have desire toward anything you see. The necessary basis for the desire toward sights is

losing the sight of (no pun intended)——losing the perspective of the nature of the eye that's the necessary basis for any sights. So, ultimately, you're going to be blind when you die. You will be deaf when you die. So seeing the ultimate result (death) in regard to your senses will make you overcome anything that comes through anything that comes through your senses. But that doesn't mean you're pretending you're not seeing, which is that wrong view that the man who talked to the Buddha had, "I'm acting like I'm blind and deaf. I'm ignoring sights and sounds, I'm pretending I'm not seeing and not hearing", and then the Buddha said, "Well, you're no better than a blind and a deaf man". That's something different. That's when people blame the sights and sounds and any other senses for their suffering, failing to see that suffering is applicable to them because they appropriated the senses, not because of what comes through them. So are you still breathing while we're discussing this particular approach of senses and eyes and blindness and deafness? Yes. Still the same breath—still the same basis for your mindfulness enduring for like an hour now. So we've been doing mindfulness of breathing all this time and discerning the Dhamma within it. On the terms of the universal principles, not on your own terms. Or as accurately as you can, whichever way you start. That's why it says: "He looks at the signs and characteristics". The features of this thing. He doesn't jump at the answers that his mind provides. Am I breathing? Yes. What would be the characteristics of this breathing? Characteristics, not mechanical description, such as thinking: "My lungs are moving..." or whatever—that's irrelevant. What is the nature of this act of breathing? Can I stop it when I want to? Well, only relatively so. Can I make sure it never goes away? No, not really. Do I have a say in that which is necessary for the act of breathing, the breathing apparatus? Not in the slightest. If an accident were to happen or a bacteria or virus were to attack these organs, would I still be able to breathe as freely? No. So I'm taking for granted that it will be forever, that it'll be in my control, that it'll be unobstructed. Why am I taking that for granted? Because I'm not thinking sufficiently enough that I cannot take it for granted. That's it. What is the condition for ignorance? It's ignoring, basically. You stop ignoring, you stop conditioning your ignorance. Stop ignoring certain universal truths, that's it.

NOT WANTING THE WANTING

by Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

Wanting sense objects that you derive pleasure from, that is sensuality, it's that wanting. So, in order to abandon sensuality, you have to stop being concerned with the objects that you want and start developing 'not wanting' of that wanting of the sense objects. Of course, restraint needs to be done first and then, on the basis of that, you can start discerning the nature of wanting anything sensual.

As long as you remain focussed on the objects that you want, you are then failing to see the root of sensuality, but consequently, if you develop 'not wanting' in regard to that wanting of sense objects, that's how you overcome the sense objects. You lose concern with them because you uprooted them, through developing 'not wanting' of their wanting.

Sensuality is the wanting of sensual objects, welcoming, entertaining, delighting in them. That would be your wanting and accepting of that wanting of sense objects at face value. A skilled monk, a person who practises correctly, will then first be restrained and then start seeing that it's the wanting that's the problem.

Through not welcoming, entertaining or delighting in the wanting of sensual objects, you surmount the whole domain of sensuality.

That's what I mean when I say develop the 'not wanting' of sensual objects, that's what 'don't delight' means. A person who doesn't see this will either be concerned with sensual objects, denying them, saying it's impermanent or ugly, basically misapplying his effort towards sense objects, or failing to see that they are rooted in 'being wanted' that is the problem. But then equally he will then try to override that initial wanting of sensual objects, try to get rid of it, try to prevent it from arising, but you can't do that because the arising is not in you.

As the Buddha said, "the eye wants to see pleasant sights etc" – that's just the structure of your experience. That's how the five senses operate, that's why the Buddha referred to them as five feeding grounds. So, trying to interfere with that wanting of sense objects is also taking it up.

Not delighting does not mean that you deny that first arising, it means you see it as a whole, or you see that there are the sense objects that are being wanted by the senses and that's what you don't delight in. If wanting of sensuality has arisen, it's going to persist on its own as an arisen dhamma, as an arisen phenomena for as long as it persists. Your only concern is to not delight in it for any time during its duration.

If somebody arrives in front of your door and wants to come in, the only way for them to enter is if you welcome them in. So in the beginning you might feel awkward, pressured and nervous because the person is in front of your door and you either go out to welcome him in out of weakness etc, but then you realize that you can't let him in – he can stand there for hundreds of years if he wants, that's not your concern. Your concern is to not welcome him inside. If you start practising like that, things will go away of their own accord. The Mara's daughters, they are going to try and harass you for as long as they perceive a way in, a possibility of being allowed to come inside. When they tried with the Buddha, after his enlightenment, they could not get in because he had been practising for years. For a person who hasn't been practising, it's then enough for someone to come and stand at the door and that person will cave in and start engaging with them, because of the uncomfortable pressure.

All one has to do is keep the door closed, not try to chase anyone away because that would be engaging with them. Affirming or denying, either way, you are engaged with things. So, the only way to not engage is to allow a thing to arise, whichever way it arises and then not welcome it. Don't open the door, and if you do that to the extent necessary, with the passage of time, it will stop coming.

As some suttas say "you establish your mind in the imperturbable in regard to sensuality". It doesn't matter what arises, one is not concerned with the content, you just maintain the attitude of not wanting the arisen wanting of these sense objects. If you do that long enough then the arising of the wanting of sense objects will change its significance. It's not going to be about sense objects anymore, it's going to be about "oh, this is that which is not welcomed or delighted in, this is that which is not wanted, this is that which used to be my sensuality". Even wanting the absence of those things is taking up the wanting. The significance changes while the objects remain the same and the whole domain remains the same. The eyes still have their feeding

ground, but now you have conquered them, now they can't go feed like the wild animals used to do, you are now the one in control. So, the eye will get to eat only what the mind that doesn't want any of it allows, and whatever it allows, it won't be a sensual thing. Because that has been abandoned.

Sensuality requires taking that wanting for granted. That's why if you stop wanting the wanting of sense objects, you get to see the extent of the wanting in regard to the sense objects, you get to understand the gratification. By seeing that, you get to understand the danger of the wanting of sense objects. If you say 'yes' to the wanting of pleasant sights and then within the next 10 seconds you go blind, or those sights are ripped away from you, would you be affected? Of course you would, but if you never give in to the original wanting of those sights, would you then be affected? You wouldn't, because you never took on that wanting, you never welcomed it in. Like the simile of the mango tree.... (MN 54)

That directionality of wanting the sense objects is always directional, as in it's always going to take you one way or another, which means that you can't maintain the perspective of the domain – you have to commit to it and go with it, which means that you are not in control. It's all great when things are going the way you want, but it's inconceivable that that's how things will always be. Not just from the side of your own senses failing, but also the objects as well. Just ask yourself, which is more? The times I got what I wanted or the times I didn't, and you realise, of course, it's the times I didn't get what I wanted is more. So, whenever I got what I wanted, it was circumstantial, accidental – the bases of usually not getting what I wanted.

If you stop wanting any type of wanting of the sense objects, you cannot not get what you want, because you only want one thing – non-sensuality and now that is implied in sensuality. Sensuality keeps reminding you of your freedom from sensuality. Sense objects keep reminding you of your imperturbable state.

One needs to understand what sensuality is, which is the wanting of the sense objects, not just the wanting or just the sense objects. It's the wanting of these pleasing sights etc, it's this pressure I experience on the level of my body, on the level of my senses.

So, you stop wanting the wanting, which means that you will also have to stop being concerned with the object of your sensuality, but start looking at the nature of sensuality which is 'it being wanted'. So, you don't want that which is being wanted in regard to the senses. What you will then get is unshakeable peace or freedom from suffering.

Sensuality is inherently unpleasant, it's dangerous, it's of very little gratification, it's not worth even making the effort for the gratification. It's like someone asking you for \$1000 for a lottery ticket which has a maximum win of \$5 – it's ridiculous. Why would you do that, yet that's what sensuality is. Even with the most refined type of sensuality, the utmost reward that you will get is always 100th of your investment. That's why the Buddha gave the simile of sensuality being like a meatless bone that a dog keeps chewing because it's just mad with it, he gets nothing in return. It's of little gratification not because you theoretically pondered over it and you mused how unsatisfactory it is – no, it's a fact, that's the deal you always get. All you need to do is not invest in sensuality and you will gain a thousand-fold. All you need is to practise renunciation to win.

All you need to do is not do sensuality and you win. That's the pleasure of jhāna – the pleasure of relief from the burden.

With sensuality, it's not just that you do not get any reward – you lose even more. By contrast, renunciation is loss and debt-free.

You cannot understand the nature of sensuality correctly and still want it, the two are mutually exclusive. Understanding of it means not wanting it. People engage in sensuality because that's the only pleasure they know. That's not necessarily the problem, you use the same criteria, 'I want pleasure', the senses want pleasure. That's fine, but it's about what pleasure you pursue with this, that's the difference, and that's what the Buddha realized – that there is nothing unwholesome with the pleasure of jhāna or renunciation.

So, from the point of view of 'wanting the pleasure of the senses', you will get more pleasure through restraining than sensuality.

That's why sensuality and carelessness go hand-in-hand. You need to be careless and lose sight of the perspective in order to be pulled by sensuality and give in. But everybody starts by being careless and being sensual within the sensual domain. So, you start with restraint in order to develop the perspective of it – then you can say 'no' to the right things.

That's why sensuality is not wanted by anyone, and not discerning that, you habitually go with that arisen 'wanting of your senses'. You appropriate it and then you think that you want it. So, you don't deny the sense objects or the wanting of them, but you say 'no' to them and let them endure without giving in at any point of the duration. Then you realise the pain here, that the unpleasant aspect is the aspect of the sense of suffering on account of not getting the object, but neither of that is mine, and then eventually those senses will calm down. Like the taming of the wild animal 'simile... (SN 35:247)

If that's not working in someone's practice, they are probably denying 'the wanting of the sense objects', as in interfering with it, or are too concerned with denying the sense objects themselves. Which means they don't have the perspective of the nature of the sensual domain, but if they do, they realise that that domain has arisen on its own. Sensuality is there – eyes want to see etc., don't interfere with that. Don't be careless in regard to that.

Not wanting the wanting of sense objects needs to be universal, that attitude needs to be developed so you say "This is not just for today or tomorrow that I don't want this, this is for the rest of my life and future lives if that might happen". The wanting of the sense objects will never be wanted, will never be welcomed. It might arise countless times more for you, but every time it arises, it is not welcomed and you won't open the door until eventually it will have to go away. Either way, you will win, you will win by not being bothered, by not losing your investments stupidly, by not exposing yourself to risk and then, on top of that, by discerning the nature of the imperturbable, which is immeasurably more pleasurable in a wholesome sense. You can't even compare it to the pleasure of sensuality. They are two different domains, they are

mutually exclusive. You can't have jhāna and have sensuality. Through discerning and abandoning the sensual domain, you develop the impenetrable in regard to that domain, that's the pleasure of jhānas. Welcoming the possibility of sensuality in the future will keep sensuality pressuring you. Reaching the state of freedom from sensuality depends on your power of conviction.

CONTEMPLATION AND AWARENESS

by Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

Discerning the background

Thaniyo: In terms of contemplating the 32 parts of the body, how do you do that correctly? You actually cannot see your brain, your lungs, intestines, etc. And when you think about it, when you want to contemplate your brain, your lungs, etc, then what is there is actually an idea, a thought. So actually now I'm attending to that thought, and then I'm picking up the signs of those things.

Nyanamoli: Yes, that's the difference there. The only way people approach this, the only way they would know how, is through attending—in other words, they would be attending that thought as if that's really attending to your brain, which you can't. So, the only way to see these body parts correctly, in the relevant contemplation manner, is indirectly, without attending to them directly as objects of your attention. You are to discern them as that-because-of-which you are here living, attending to things.

That's the difference between doing body contemplation rightly and wrongly. Wrongly is basically just repeating these parts, visualizing them and thinking that that somehow equates to understanding them. It might provide you an initial kind of reduction of sensual craving, because you never think about those things, but very soon you'll get used to it and it'll become meaningless because you can't see those things directly. That's why in paṭiccasamuppāda the saḷāyatana (the six-sense base) is the ultimate indirect, it's the ultimate peripheral. It's the ultimate that-because-of-which-there-is-the-world-for-you, that because of which you are the perceiver, you are the conceiver of it. That's why when the Buddha describes the six-sense base, it's described in that almost external, medical manner—the fleshy eye, the nose and so on—because that's the closest you can see it. You can't see it directly: you cannot attend to your eye, you can only attend to the object.

But that's not the eye because of which you see things. You are misconceiving it, thinking that that's the eye because of which you see things. You start assuming that you can attend that because of which your attention is there. You have to stop trying to attend to the eye, the nose, and start discerning it as a basis, as a physical basis for the world to exist for you. In the same sense, you can be attending to a cup, attending to a table, attending to the image of your brain, but you're just regarding these things as overly objectified objects of your attention. In a way, they have something in common—they're all material. But you don't want to regard your brain just as you regard a cup, because a cup is insignificant to you—you want to discern that that objective brain that you're thinking about is the reason for your subjectivity, because of which you're able to attend to the idea of the brain in the first place.

Thaniyo: So, I have to keep reminding myself of that?

Nyanamoli: Well, you might have to initially, to remind yourself to recreate the right order of things—so that you can dwell on it—but after a while, you don't have to: it will be enough just to remember it, because you will know how to look indirectly. You will know how to see things without having to look at them.

People might misunderstand when I mention 'the simultaneous presence'. They might end up thinking it's like two things at the same time, momentarily present in front of you. But when I say 'simultaneous presence'—and that is the way the Suttas talk about it—it's basically two things that are present on two different levels. It doesn't mean they are there equally present at the same time for a second or two, and then you must catch them both at the same time. It is not like that, because you are just trying to catch one thing. You can divide it into a million sub-parts—your attention is still looking at that foreground of an object.

But when we talk about the simultaneous presence, we are saying it endures: the peripheral endures. For example, you have an image of your brain, but you don't overly attend to it as a random object in the world of which you tell yourself "This body is not mine." It is not like that, but you have to see that image of the brain without misconceiving it, and then you start discerning that this is the closest you can get to that which your life actually depends upon, that form. The closest you can get is through these images of the brain, lungs, heart, blood, and so on. You realize all of them stand for that, because of which you are conscious here living this life, but you can't possibly enter that brain in the way of accessing it through your perception, or anything like that. Why? Because it precedes it. But you can know that the image of the brain that you have on that peripheral level is that because of which you're able to be present here and now, and attend to these various other things that arise. In other words, when you stop thinking about the brain, your knowledge that that's the order of your experience—meaning you're undermined by the matter—doesn't change.

That's what I mean when I say it's simultaneously present. You don't have to keep thinking about it. You can actually forget about it, but rightly. It would basically constitute rightful forgetfulness, which is when your forgetfulness does not induce avijjā anymore. You don't have to keep thinking—it's impossible to keep thinking about everything all the time.

Thaniyo: That makes sense since you can't really think "Brain... brain... brain" all the time.

Nyanamoli: Exactly, because you just keep forcing it into the foreground, and then you fail to see what the peripheral is, which means you have now overly misconceived the brain and you're making it into an object of your perception, which it is impossible for it to be. The eye cannot see itself.

Let me say it like this: for example, you think about the brain rightly, peripherally. You discern the image of the brain, meaning you recognize there is the brain in here because of which my experience still exists, and then you stop thinking about it. And then three hours later you think about it again, and it's important here to introduce the attitude if you have to—eventually, you will recognize it as such. It's important, when three

hours later you think about the brain again, you recognize that it's the same brain that has been here this whole time. The fact that you forgot about it did not make it not there.

The same applies with moods or feelings. For example, you have a present mood arisen—it's sort of agreeable, but then you start attending to more particular things, and of course you don't go around thinking how agreeable your day is. But then, later on, four or six hours later, you look back and you remember it again—that it was agreeable. It's the same mood. And that's what I mean when I say you have to let it endure. That means that when you bring it back, you don't make it yours, but you recognize it as it has been enduring on its own. That's how you start discerning the simultaneous principle I'm talking about. Simultaneous in the sense that the general mood—the general notion of the matter being there—for example, in the contemplation of the body—it's been there enduring on its own, whether you thought about it or not. So, when you do remember, you will eventually stop giving priority to the thought “I remembered this” and “I'm attending to this” and “I'm practicing this”—you will just find it. It's simultaneously present with everything else you do, when you don't attend to that. It's the necessary basis, basically, for your action, for your choice, for your attention.

Thaniyo: So, we should develop the domain, the background. So, one wants to develop it but in the process of that, he forgets about it.

Nyanamoli: You develop it by learning how to discern that it's already there.

Thaniyo: Sure, but then...

Nyanamoli: Then you have to forget about it.

Thaniyo: After a minute?

Nyanamoli: After a minute, that's fine. Then when you remember it, you want to abandon the attitude of “I must restart this practice because I forgot about it.” Instead of that, you want to develop recognition and think: “Oh, yes, it's still there.” That's pretty much the crucial difference that I'm talking about. Many people say “Be here now... be present... just feel... just this, it's just like that” and whatnot, but it all revolves around just telling yourself: “Come back to the present moment, come back to the present moment.” You want to recognize that when you come back to the present moment, you can only do so because it was there enduring beforehand.

Then you realize you can't forget about it even if you want to. You're responsible for your own ignorance, because you're responsible for the attitude of thinking you have to hold it in front of you and that's the only way for it to exist. You forget about it after a minute, then you remember it after five minutes, and then you think “Oh, crap! I forgot about it. I must do it again now,” as if you are the one who does it to begin with. It is not like that! Each time that attitude arises, you include that attitude in your mindfulness as well because it's not rooted in you, but it's rooted in the enduring background.

That's what the mind is—the ultimate background, *citta nimitta*. That's why it is said: “He knows the mind as exalted or as shrunk or as depressed or as elated.” These states that people almost automatically appropriate are your state of mind. As such, it endures. Five days later, you remember it again. The only reason you can remember it, is because it's still there enduring to some extent. And what will that do, this kind of practice of mindfulness? Well, you can't be treading water with it. If you keep doing it, it is forcing you basically to shift the center of your experience from your sense of self into the background of things, and even the actual things that you're attending to, because you realize that they're there because of the background, you start squeezing your own sense of self out. There is no room for it in the experience because whether you look at the background, or whether you're attending to the foreground, you realize this can be done only because these things endure on their own, beforehand.

Therefore, stop worrying about not forgetting, but instead start focusing on discerning whenever you remember and don't misconceive whenever you remember. And the most fundamental misconceiving is the idea “mine”, meaning that “I am” here, at the center—not this thing that I remembered because of which I am in the first place.

Thaniyo: If I understand correctly, whatever I attend to, at any given time, that must induce a remembering of the way things are.

Nyanamoli: Well, you don't even have to say it like that, but you can just say: “Whatever I attend to, just be aware of what I'm doing.” Include yourself in that picture. And where that sense of self is, that's already where the background is. Instead of feeling that each time you remember, you must restart the practice and then hold it as long as you can. Then you drop that whole attitude of trying to remember but instead, whenever you remember, even if it's once a day, you still don't think: “Oh, now I remembered, I must hold it.” Instead you should think: “I remembered it, it's already there, arisen beforehand. Not mine, not for me, not myself. It cannot be mine.” And that automatically affects everything else within that background, within that peripheral.

It's going to take time to see that because now the emphasis is on what you attend to—that's what matters. In practice you are thinking: “I'm attending to this, I'm attending to this,” and then you forget and try to remember it again. But that is not the way, because the only reason you can attend to anything is because it is there given as an option, which means it exists on the peripheral, where the possibilities exist.

Things are genuinely impermanent, and cannot be owned, and cannot be controlled. But you can't see that because you depend on telling yourself that things are genuinely impermanent, cannot be owned and so on. You can attend to all sorts of things, but that thing is still there on its own, that's the important bit. That's how you shift it onto the phenomenon that has arisen and is enduring, not onto you attending it. That's how you place yourself second basically. And when the sense of self is second, it's not a sense of self any more. To have the sense of self it has to always be the first, the master.

Thaniyo: Then I might start thinking about other things.

Nyanamoli: If you start thinking about other things, you use the same principle of allowing your mind to get established on the significance of that peripheral, and then let it go. Let your mind think about other things.

Basically, establishing that significance would create that enduring context. But you don't have to keep thinking "this is the context", because it's there. You just let it endure. And then you might wonder what to do then. You don't do anything. You let your mind think. Just make sure it doesn't go into sensuality, ill-will or cruelty. That's it. That's all you have to do. Just prevent it from going there. If it doesn't want to go there, you don't have to do anything. That's how you make your own sense of self redundant.

Thaniyo: What about doubt?

Nyanamoli: That's also how you go beyond doubt. If your mind is established on the peripheral—upon the nature of an enduring phenomenon—no amount of active movements of your mind, all of that is secondary to that enduring significance that you've established, so you can't doubt it. You can doubt what you're attending to, but the background of your attention is that which you cannot attend to, and you cannot doubt that if you start discerning it. If you keep confusing it and thinking that you can attend to the background of your attention—in the same sense you think you can see the eye because of which you see—then you're still affected by doubt.

That's what Ven. Nāṇavīra was talking about when he wrote about the self-identity of a self-enduring phenomenon that people confuse with their own self-identity. The identity of that thing is still there, it's still the same thing. In that sense, you are responsible for establishing your mind correctly, only to let it go and allow that establishment to endure. If done rightly it will endure. That's how you enter jhānas.

That's why it was said in the suttas that a monk doesn't think "I am entering the jhāna now", or "I will enter the jhāna." But he sets up his mind, he sets up the right significance, and then the mind gets established upon the theme of jhāna. And that's why, while that theme is enduring, all that is implied is the phenomenon of the fact that nothing that is taken as 'mine' can be owned. Yet it's the reason because of which you are there in the first place. If you establish your mind like that, then you won't be able to think—for as long as such a phenomenon is enduring—"I'm doing this and that" because it's not rooted in you anymore—it's rooted in a proper foundation, which is the foundation of the inaccessible matter: the five aggregates that cannot actually be owned.

Thaniyo: How do we know if the knowledge is developed sufficiently enough?

Nyanamoli: Dispassion is the sign, dispassion is the result.

Thaniyo: Then is one always aware of the background?

Nyanamoli: Sure, because that's not something you attend to.

Thaniyo: But then one is always aware of the background.

Nyanamoli: Yes, whatever that background is at the time. Hence, the arahant is always mindful.

Thaniyo: It doesn't have to be a specific background.

Nyanamoli: No, for as long as people think mindfulness is what you attend to, then they can't comprehend how an arahant can always be mindful and not be a robot at the same time. There is always something enduring, for as long as these aggregates don't break apart. That's what the Buddha meant when he said: "Or he develops mindfulness to the extent necessary for final knowledge." Exactly, to the extent. All the things that were implied in the perception of the beating heart, that's not in your control—yet it determines your whole life simultaneously while you're alive—you can go further within the same perception: What is the characteristic? What are the nimittas of that significance of my beating heart? It's not in my control. So, my sense of control fundamentally depends upon the greater domain of non-control, of that which is inaccessible to my control. That's nothing other than anicca. So, you develop the perception of impermanence correctly. This thing cannot be owned, cannot be appropriated, cannot be controlled, it's impermanent.

Thaniyo: Everything that is experienced?

Nyanamoli: Yes, the universal characteristics are the most universal. But as I said, sometimes the mind just won't be getting established upon it because it's too subtle and it got too distracted or whatever, so you bring it down. That's why the Buddha had such a varied range of different approaches. Looking at a dead corpse for example. On some days that will not be necessary because it will be enough just to think about the phenomenon of non-control and it will be fully establishing dispassion, renunciation, relinquishing, and everything else. But on other days it might be necessary. Either way, you're developing the same principle.

Thaniyo: So, to know that you're developing correctly—when you've actually got somewhere in development—is the sign of dispassion always there?

Nyanamoli: If the mind is properly established... Why? Because again you have shifted the emphasis from me and I, onto the enduring phenomenon that exists on its own. So even when disagreeable things arise, it becomes inconceivable to become involved in a personal manner. It's just like knowing: "The wind blows, the branches fall, the sun shines, the heart beats, people shout abuse at you." It's on the same level. That's why the Buddha listed these as elements to be endured—enduring the malicious speech, the hurtful speech and so on.

Thaniyo: So, with the breath, breathing is always there—intention to breathe, to be more specific. But I can sit now and play with my breath.

Nyanamoli: OK. But you want to know it. Like now, for most people, because they're so concerned with what they attend to, even the people who try to practice, breath is pretty much peripheral in regard to their other actions. The breath goes into the background.

But if you bring the breath into the foreground, as in if you think "I'm sitting here, breathing in, breathing out...", you don't do it in the sense of thinking you are going to be attending to this every second. You bring it to the foreground so that you will see the background of breathing. For most day-to-day experience, breath is in the background. And here you can establish significance by asking yourself if you will be alive if the breathing stops? If your airways get blocked? No. So, you could establish the same principle as we just did—of dispassion, relinquishment, non-control, not-self—by seeing the background of your breath. Or you can think: "Why don't I refine it further and start seeing the background of the actual act of breathing?" And that's how the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* goes where it says: "Knowingly he breathes in, knowingly he breathes out." And you see, actually it is not like: "I'm breathing in, I'm breathing in, I'm breathing in" while inhaling and then, "now I'm breathing out, breathing out, breathing out" while exhaling. That is not how it is said there! But rather, he's breathing in, breathing out, and he knows it, which means now he's discerning an even more general background to that, because that's what's in front of him. He puts his mindfulness to the fore, as the sutta says. No matter what he thinks, what matters is knowing the background of that doing. That's how you establish mindfulness of breathing. Mindfulness is basically synonymous with background, so when you say mindfulness, you say background. You can call mindfulness of breathing as the background of breathing.

Thaniyo: What is that background of breathing?

Nyanamoli: Well, fundamentally it comes down to the knowledge of action, any action, because breathing is an action; that would be if you fully discerned it. But initially what it will be as the background of breathing is the knowledge of breathing and of the necessity of breath, the necessity of the body.

When I say the necessity of those things it means you are not necessary, these things are necessary. It's like narrowing down the field of your concern. Don't get distracted by "I must do this and that". That's why the Buddha said: "When you develop this, that body you're discerning there is that body, the body among the bodies," which means it's the body that stands for the phenomenon of the body at the time. So, you use your breathing as a natural confinement for the concern of your thought, and you become mindful of it properly when you start discerning the background of that confinement. But, as I said, you discern the confinement because breathing is already there, whether you attend to it or not—you certainly don't make a mechanical method out of it, thinking: "I'll watch my nostrils... watch my nostrils...". There you don't discern a background, but you're actively looking away from it, while you're actively trying to focus on what's in front of you.

Thaniyo: So, what about this example of when you learn something like $2 + 2$ equals 4. You know that now, so every time you look at $2 + 2$ —

Nyanamoli: The knowledge is there. Imagine the same principle applied to the universal nature of experience. Whenever you look at anything that has arisen, you see its cessation. That's the insight of the sotapanna: "Whatever has the nature of arising...". It doesn't say "whatever has arisen in front of me is impermanent." "Whatever has the nature of arising" means it's already a peripheral knowledge. The nature of a thing is something you cannot attend to. You can discern it based on things you're attending to. So, you discern that whatever has the nature of arising, for that reason has to cease.

Thaniyo: What is the sign of "arisen"?

Nyanamoli: Cessation. Because of its arising, not because it's going to disappear, but because it has arisen. So, whenever things arise for you, which is for as long as the five aggregates exist, you see impermanence.

That's why arahantship is irreversible, Right View is irreversible. You cannot forget that, because everything contains it. That's why it's such a general statement—because that's the most accurate way you could say it. "Whatever has the nature of arising, has the nature of ceasing." That's it.

Thaniyo: So that significance, that sign, is always there because whatever is manifested is always there.

Nyanamoli: Exactly, that is its nature. That's why the dhammā are the phenomena, and then the Dhamma, as in the Teaching, is the nature of the phenomena. The phenomenology, literally—the knowledge of the phenomena. So, whatever has the nature of manifestation, has the nature of this teaching of the Dhamma, the nature of impermanence and so on.

In practice, you look at the breath, you contemplate the body so as to keep discerning this nature of manifestation clearer and clearer. It's already there on its own, manifested. You're not creating it by attending to it, you can only attend to it because it's already there enduring. You cannot create anything from nothingness and bring it into being because you are the result of it. Your attention is already secondary to it, structurally, not in the sense of a sequence like 1, 2, 3. It's all within the same arisen basis of the present form, paired with consciousness that you cannot step outside of. Any movement you make within it, is strictly within it. If you try to attend to that, it would require you to step outside of it and see it as an object, but that's inconceivable. And if you keep doing it, it's because you're misconceiving that you can do it. You want to discern these universal characteristics of things, not by your attending to them and thinking they exist only when you attend to them. And that's how you uproot your sense of self. You can't step outside of yourself or the five aggregates, but you can certainly stop misconceiving them, and that can be done only from the inside.

On sensuality

Thaniyo: There is a Sutta from AN 4:181: "How is a bhikkhu a long-distance shooter? Any kind of form whatsoever, past, future, present, whatever—a bhikkhu sees all form as it really is with correct wisdom."

Nyanamoli: Yes, so shooting the peripheral discernment. For example, within the significance of the heart you can discern even further: what is a more refined significance than this beating heart already implied, which is the significance of earth, water, fire, air. Significance of impermanence, non-control. So, if a bhikkhu is a long-distance shooter, it means he doesn't even have to go through, for example, establishing the significance of the heart to discern these other more refined significances—his mind is already developed to the level of discerning refined significances in whatever has arisen. And these refined significances—refined signs—are the impermanence, four great elements, etc.

Thaniyo: The Sutta goes further: “And how is a bhikkhu a sharpshooter?”

Nyanamoli: He goes for the significances that are fundamental to freedom from suffering basically.

You would arrive at that through contemplating the independence of the four great elements, your dependence on it, etc. You would eventually drain away any conceit, any misconceiving, which will result in freedom from suffering. Or if you shoot precisely, you go straight for freedom from suffering, because that's already implied.

Thaniyo: Because that's like the most general recognition. Whatever has arisen, will cease, and you develop that.

Nyanamoli: That's also what it means to be paññavimutti. One who's liberated through wisdom because he discerns only things relevant to liberation. He doesn't develop all the jhānas and everything else, but discerns the right things to the sufficient extent.

Like now when you speak about it, it will be quite an abstract thing. But the only reason it's abstract is because the mind hasn't been developed in regard to that abstraction, so start developing it. Start discerning it in arisen things that endure for you, in front of you, throughout your daily life—because these things are there. They will remain abstract for as long as you don't see them as they are—so you abstract them, literally.

Thaniyo: And then the Sutta goes further: “And how is a bhikkhu one who splits a great body? Here, a bhikkhu splits the great mass of ignorance. Possessing these four qualities he's worthy of offerings. And how is a bhikkhu skilled in places? He's virtuous, seeing the danger in the slightest fault...”

Nyanamoli: That's also where you see the danger—it's in that peripheral. The danger is in the background—the danger is the implication of what's in front of you. The danger is the context that you create. A puthujjana doesn't see the danger in sensuality, but if he starts thinking about it, discerning it, he'll get to see it because it is actually dangerous. That's how you can see the danger in the slightest fault, and not become neurotically obsessed about every little thing that's in front of you, fearing it—because that's not where the danger is. That's like the simile of the beautiful, tasty beverage: you can't see the poison in it, but you know it is there—which means ultimately the danger of sensuality is rooted in the background, and can never come in front of you and be seen in the same manner as you see an object of your senses.

That's why people are intoxicated with sensuality, despite the experience always proving that it's actually painful—you only regard things as real if they're the things that you can see through your senses, usually. So, you want to discern it. And that danger, as I said, never leaves the peripheral, never becomes something you can see with your eyes. You still see the beautiful object, but now you have fully understood and fully discerned the danger.

You have to know that poison is there, and you have to stop ignoring the fact that poison is there—and then you get to see that whatever is beautiful, you fully understood it as being dangerous, that 'this will kill me'. But you can't see the poison and you can't extract it and then say, "look, this is the poison! See?". Because that would then imply that other things you can see don't have that poison. Poison is actually in everything you see, hear, smell, taste, touch. Everything that's agreeable contains that poison because it's agreeable. You could think that the agreeability of things is what poison is. But that in itself is not dangerous, is it? What's dangerous is you carelessly ingesting the poison. You carelessly welcoming the agreeability, delighting in it, saying 'yes' to it.

Thaniyo: So, the danger is not the result.

Nyanamoli: No, exactly. The danger is that significance of it. If you take it, then danger befalls you.

Thaniyo: We'd usually think that danger of sensuality comes only if you overindulge.

Nyanamoli: No, no, no, that's basically on the level of perception. I suppose someone who's completely unrestrained has to start rounding it up in such a crude manner.

Such kind of reflections that a complete assutava puthujjana will have to go through in order to begin, but that's not the danger. That's why the Buddha would say you're not free from sensuality until the danger becomes apparent. And the danger does not become apparent if, for you, to even get a sense of danger, you need to go through the motions of repeating how dissatisfying sensuality actually is, and so on—that's on the level of rationalizing.

It can help somebody who has absolutely no ground for practice, but you want to go way beyond that—you want to be able to get to the point where seeing the agreeable equals knowing the danger. That's why the Buddha said knowledge is secondary to perception, but you can equally have perception without knowledge being present there. So, knowledge is not in perception, which means you can't perceive the knowledge, but you can know that which you perceive at the same time.

In the case of a cup or drink in front of you—you're drinking it and it's very good; people told you it's healthy. People told you it's going to prolong your life and cure cancer, and it's amazing. But then somebody comes and tells you that it's actually going to kill you, going to shorten your life. See, both could be right, meaning you don't know which one is right; but the fact that it's been placed in doubt that it's good for you is actually enough for you to back off from it. You think that it is better not to take any chances. Perhaps you don't need a longer life, because it might even actually shorten it. Let alone if it actually becomes apparent

that the second guy was right and it will kill you quicker, it will ruin you. But that which is in front of you hasn't changed—your experience of it is still the same.

Thaniyo: So, it might harm you.

Nyanamoli: The fact that you don't know for yourself whether it's good for you—that's already dangerous. And if you start thinking like that, the danger will become apparent—the danger that is actually there—but you can't see that until you arrive at it, which means you can't know that for yourself.

You have to take it on trust that sensuality is dangerous, and start regarding it as such and, because it is dangerous, your way of regarding it will eventually mirror how it is and you'll get to understand it.

And now, the peripheral of that perception of sensuality is the knowledge of the danger. It's the significance of the danger, it's the implication of the danger.

Thaniyo: But if you don't have the knowledge of the danger, what are you looking for?

Nyanamoli: Well, first if you don't discern the phenomenon of sensuality, you're not going to discern the background of the danger. In the same sense mindfulness of breathing is like a confinement that represents all the other actions you do in your life on account of your breathing, but then you're not doing that confinement. You want to discern the background of that confinement. Then that makes everything inferior to that even clearer. So, in the same sense, you want to discern the extent of sensuality in order to discern the background of the danger. That's why the Buddha would always start by saying: "The gratification of sensuality has been understood, the danger has become apparent." He wouldn't say that the danger has become apparent, and then he understood. But by understanding the extent of sensuality, by understanding its gratification, then the background of that, the danger, becomes clear. But not before you understand the extent of physical pleasures, craving for physical pleasures. And you can only understand the extent if you start looking for it. And the gratification of sensuality is not in the particular engagement of this sensuality, it's in the background of your particular engagement.

There are obviously kinds of sensuality that you cannot be mindful of—the ones that take the mind too far out, such as non-celibacy, killing, lying, stealing. You abandon that; but now you have to eat. Within that, you're going to get pleasant tastes in your mouth. And then you might think: "Oh, I must spit this out because it's too pleasant." In that case you don't see the gratification: you fear everything, you're spitting out the object, but that's not what sensuality is. Sensuality is your attitude in regard to the object you're attending to. If all you do is attend to things, you're never going to see your attitude in regard to it. Now that you live restrained, you're not breaking vinaya rules, you see the danger in the slightest fault. Then when you encounter agreeable things that are a basis for sensuality, that's when you start looking for the background to it. You allow it to arise while the taste is in your mouth. The Buddha didn't say "spit out the food!" But he said we should eat mindfully, meaning eat while you're aware of the background of your pleasant taste. Don't get absorbed in the pleasant taste. And try to not get absorbed by the pleasant taste by focusing on other things, or twisting their tongue to avoid the taste and whatnot. No, that's equally on the same footing

as where the taste is. You want to just know the background of the pleasant taste—that's already clarifying the extent of gratification. The clearer the extent of the perception of gratification becomes, the clearer the significance of the danger. Hence, the gratification became clear, the danger has been seen, has become apparent, and then the way out from sensuality and gratification is automatic.

So, first, you have to be restrained, not giving in to distraction. If you intentionally give in to sensuality, you can't establish that mindfulness, because your intention has already distorted it—it's already inverted, perverted. But if agreeable things that are a base for sensuality come to you, without your intention necessarily being rooted in seeking the pleasure in them, that's where you start discerning the peripheral, that's where the gratification of sensuality becomes clearer. That's why sila has to come first, it's just not optional. But the problem is when people see that sila comes first and then believe that after it comes the denial of anything pleasant, even if it's not sought by you; that becomes the next attitude. They think: "This taste is way too nice, so I only eat things that I hate." But you're basically misconceiving sensuality. You think sensuality is in the actual taste, and you think that by avoiding taste, you avoid sensuality. No, you just obscure it further.

Thaniyo: If you were free from sensuality, you would be what?

Nyanamoli: You'd be an anagami. If you don't have the right view, you could be free from sensuality and then you would need very, very little instruction to get the right view because you've already done 80% of the work: 80% of the fundamental existential distractions which are the senses. That would have been tamed and surmounted and understood.

Thaniyo: Because if you see things, knowing that whatever has arisen, the background is "it will cease," and then you turn your mind to what is the extent of sensuality...

Nyanamoli: Exactly, you see the same principle. And also those who don't see that principle, but have seen the sensuality, they have removed pretty much the sole reason for not seeing impermanence.

Virtually, sensuality is the main reason because it results in distraction and everything else. So, you have removed that, you have understood that, you've developed your mind in regard to it. You have seen the peripheral of that domain, you've seen the danger in it, and then you just need somebody to tell you what the impermanence of phenomena is, and you would immediately go straight to anagami, or even arahant because you've already done all the work.

Thaniyo: So, you're saying that the danger of sensuality is being pulled in the foreground.

Nyanamoli: Yes. See, all that is accurate, but you want to see that not as a statement that you made, but actually see it coming from that sensuality. But in order to see it, you have to be clarifying that understanding, even those statements, for yourself. The more you clarify it, the more of the significance is being clarified. And then you will get to recognize it. But the fundamental danger in sensuality is exactly that: you cannot remain not pulled, not distorted by the foreground. You cannot.

You're only free when you surmount the danger. You're only free when you surmount ignorance. So, if you don't surmount it, you're not free. And that's the danger of saṃsāra. Not free means saṃsāra.

Thaniyo: Am I not then seeing the danger in sensuality, if I see that?

Nyanamoli: Well, you're seeing it to some extent, sure, but you want to see that to the point where any desire toward it has faded away—towards sensual enjoyment—, and it will fade away when the perception of danger—that background implication, significance of danger—is developed to the extent necessary, whereby no matter how much you get distracted, you'll never, ever go back to the point of being so distracted that you actually want sensuality.

In the same sense of when you vomit food that you ate, you'll never ever get so hungry to eat that stuff that's mouldy and filthy and mixed with soil. It's just not perceived as edible anymore. That's how far you want to go. Where sensuality has ceased to be perceived as worthy of engagement, where it's actually the opposite. Non-engagement is what's worthy, non-engagement is what freedom is for you. Engagement is death for you, results in death, implies death. It makes you liable to death. Literally, you wouldn't be killed if somebody comes and shoots you in the head. That's not death. Death is sending your mind back down to the senses. That's how you get killed. Because if you take your mind away from the senses—you surmount sensuality—even if somebody comes and shoots you in the head, you are not killed. So that's why the Buddha said that those who are not mindful—those who are not properly established upon the peripheral background discernment of that significance—they're as if already dead.

Thaniyo: Because if you see the extent of sensuality, then you know very well when you step into it.

Nyanamoli: Yes, it cannot be done accidentally. It's always a choice. If you're aware of the background, you're aware of being about to make a choice. You're aware of the possibilities to choose, which means you realize you're already responsible; you're already choosing the direction of sensuality even before you directly engage with it.

Thaniyo: So, basically seeing the choice of sensuality is also seeing the extent of sensuality.

Nyanamoli: Sure. Seeing the extent of sensuality, seeing the background of sensuality. Discerning gradually the significance of it. Taking responsibility for the choice. That's another approach to the same thing.

DON'T BE FAITHFUL TO IGNORANCE

by Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

Thaniyo: I was wondering if we could speak about lying, the phenomenon of lying, the choice to lie. A simple question: Is it wrong to lie? Where can we go with that?

Nyanamoli: It is. So now you may ask why is it wrong to lie? Don't just take it as true because an authority 'declared' that lying is wrong and now you must obey that. Yes, lying is wrong, but you want to investigate why it is wrong. So, what's the first, most obvious thing that shows itself if you start to investigate why lying would be wrong? What is lying?

Thaniyo: Dishonesty.

Nyanamoli: OK, so dishonesty, lying, concealing. What do all those things have in common?

Thaniyo: The person not wanting something to be known.

Nyanamoli: Exactly, which means there is something, but you want it to be different. So, in its nature, it's a discrepancy, a contradiction—two opposing things: one is the truth, the other is what you would prefer it to be.

But the problem with lying is—phenomenologically speaking, from the point of view of a person who practices mindfulness and tries to develop wisdom—that you cannot deny the truth without giving importance to your point of view over the truth. That's why lying is practically wrong—lying is practically an obstacle for developing wisdom. If you could, say, theoretically, lie without perverting that existential order of truth and your point of view, then lying would not be unwholesome. But it is impossible to engage in an act of lying without implicitly, immediately fueling the wrong order, whereby it's my point of view, my preference that comes first—truth is second.

When I say truth, I mean factual presence of a self-arisen phenomenon, and that's the key here—it's not like 'the Truth', as in there is 'a lie' and then there is 'the Truth'. Denying whatever truth is at the time by serving a lie, means you're also implicitly overriding the most self-evident, basic nature of the arisen experience—that it comes first, structurally. Your point of view is structurally second. So, by engaging in a lie, you're engaging in a perversion of that order. That's why even a little lie is as bad as a big lie—from the point of view of the mind that wants to practice—because practice means undoing any perversion to the existential order of the five aggregates.

In the same sense, you cannot engage in a sensual act without sensual perceptions being implied, and sensual perceptions are sensual distortions. In other words, you can't engage in sensuality without being distorted by sensuality at the same time—without fueling the already persisting distortion of sensual perception. Likewise, you can't engage in a lie without fueling the existential distortion of the arisen phenomena, the truth—the self-evident arising of whatever's present. It's recognizing that that arisen experience is there on

its own, which means my attitude and my actions concerning it are only because this thing allows my actions to be a possibility.

For example, if there is no unpleasant feeling manifested, would you even be able to conceive acting out of an unpleasant feeling, to try to get rid of it? You wouldn't. Or, on a less fundamental level, if you take some experience, for example, you have to go to work. That's your arisen situation that persists and has its significance—things you have to do, reasons why you have to do them. You need to earn money, you need to provide things, etc. That's your factual situation. On account of it, you'll be acting left and right and deciding. But when you start engaging in an act of lying, you're overriding that very order. That doesn't mean you can change the order—there are still things arisen on their own— but you are fully gratuitously giving priority to your point of view, which in itself, at that time, is based on ignoring what the real order is. In other words, you start lying about having to go to work—lying to yourself, not even lying to others—you start saying to yourself that you don't need to go to work, because really you don't want to go to work. You start lying because the arisen thing is unbearable, or not necessarily unbearable, but it's unpleasant and you don't want to have to deal with it. That's why another aspect of an act of lying is that it's always rooted in avoiding displeasure—why else would you be lying? Unless you yourself perceive that, if you don't admit the truth, you will avoid that displeasure, the pain of that truth. But can you really avoid the pain through looking elsewhere? You can't. You're only acting out of it.

Thaniyo: You're looking elsewhere because it's there.

Nyanamoli: Exactly. But the fact that you engaged in an act of lying means you do have—or you had it before, and now you're maintaining—the belief that you can avoid the arisen pressure of the truth, the displeasure of the truth, simply by lying. Which then implies that you can avoid, existentially, arisen phenomena simply by providing another phenomenon.

The act of lying is fundamentally rooted in a wrong-view—that's why it's fundamentally unwholesome. And it's the same with any of the precepts that the Buddha laid out—none of them are universally given 'Commandments'. All of them are rooted in the principle of greed, aversion and delusion—which separately are all also principles of some form of contradicting the arisen nature of experience—which is why it's unwholesome to break them. They're not unwholesome because it's a universal morality—they're unwholesome because they go against how things have arisen. And that's how you can know for yourself that they're unwholesome—once you understand the nature of things as they have arisen. Then you have a criterion for what's skillful and what's unskillful—what's wholesome and what's unwholesome.

That's why lying is always wrong—it always goes against the nature of an arisen thing, whatever that thing is. So, the example we gave: you don't want to go and do this particular work. Now you can admit that. You don't have to lie to yourself, but that means now you have to take responsibility for the displeasure you're feeling. You realize "The work needs to be done, but I choose not to do it". Which means all the reasons that were making you do this work—supporting your family, earning money, whatever else was the motivation for working—you're now responsible for not meeting any of those requirements. And when, down the line, circumstances remind you of that—your family starts asking for money, or you get sick and you can't pay for

your treatment and so on—it's because you chose not to do this particular work, so you're responsible for that. This future misfortune, that came as a result of not being able to look after yourself, is because you chose not to look after yourself. There's nothing wrong with that—you have every right to choose not to, but that means you must take responsibility for what comes out of it. But now that means that, by trying to avoid the responsibility of doing your duty, you're actually paying the price, which is even worse. Now you can't provide for your family, you don't have enough money for this or for that, for food... and that's on you. A result of your choice to avoid the work. And that's very unpleasant—you have to admit that it's on you—and it can endure for weeks, months—for as long as you don't get out of that situation. But it's still a responsible thing to do – to admit the weight of your choices.

But it's way too easy to not admit it, if only you find another reason for not doing the work, apart from you not wanting to do it. And that's the nature of bad faith in existential philosophy, which is like lying, but not quite, because you're not necessarily fully self-aware of the truth, because it's that very truth you're trying to cover up from yourself.

Now, if you say that you couldn't work because of such and such reason—because it was raining for example— it's not “I couldn't work because I chose rain to be the reason for my not working,” but it's “It was raining, so I couldn't work,” which means now, when you don't have enough money, it's the weather's fault. So, you bypass responsibility for not working at that time, and consequently for all the future results of not working, because it's not on you.

That's why for people it's always the easiest thing to blame another, or to blame circumstances—that's the inauthentic attitude we speak about often—because, unless you take responsibility on that fundamental level, you'll never have a basis for Dhamma to apply, and the fundamental responsibility is suffering. Again, you don't want to work because it's unpleasant—you don't want to accept future responsibility for the consequences of not working, because it's unpleasant. So fundamentally, you don't want to suffer, and you keep avoiding displeasure as the only means of dealing with suffering that you know. But it doesn't deal with it—evading suffering can only be done because suffering has arisen—that's the truth. Displeasure is manifested, and you're liable to future manifestations of displeasure. That's the truth that you will never understand, because all your actions revolve around avoiding that very truth. And then lying to other people is just an extension of this very principle.

You can't undo that principle—when lying to yourself—unless you stop habitually lying to other people. But ceasing to lie to other people doesn't necessarily mean you will automatically undo lying to yourself. That takes a further effort, but that further effort is only possible on the basis of the first effort of stopping lying to others. Stop maintaining, proliferating that wrong order of things through your act of lying to others, so you reduce it a bit—and then you will be able to stop lying to yourself as well, and that's how you can accept responsibility.

And suffering, as I said, is the fundamental responsibility. See, you can say “I suffer because he said this,” or “I suffer because I didn't get enough,” or “I suffer because I lost my family”, or something like that. If suffering were truly rooted in those things, you wouldn't be able to free yourself from it. But, as the Buddha

himself understood and then taught to others, it fortunately isn't rooted in those things—it's rooted in your resistance to the disagreeable things that come your way, and these are two different things. But, for as long as your actions maintain the view that it's in the things—in what he said, or she said, or what I had, what I lost—you will never take responsibility for suffering, for your resistance to the disagreeable experience. And because of that, you will always remain affected by the disagreeable experience. So, the only way to stop resisting the disagreeable experience is to take responsibility for the disagreeable experience.

Thaniyo: Don't lie to yourself.

Nyanamoli: Don't lie to yourself, and consequently you won't be lying to others. That's why an arahant cannot lie. He became incapable of lying to himself—where the problem is—because he solved the problem. But in order to not lie to yourself, you have to stop habitually lying to others.

Thaniyo: What about the common 'white lies'?

Nyanamoli: They're not as bad, but you have to be strict and you've got to see—does it partake in the principle of lying, the principle you're trying to undo? The principle of perverting the order of existence, putting the blame where the blame isn't. And if you look at the white lies, then you realize they're still perverting that order. Why would you tell a white lie? Because you don't want discomfort. Why don't you want discomfort? Because you're blaming the discomfort for pain, which means by not wanting discomfort, you're avoiding responsibility for resisting the discomfort, and blaming the discomfort for your suffering, thinking "I'll just quickly tell a white lie so I don't get discomfort, which means I won't suffer." No, you don't suffer when you don't resist—it's not that you don't suffer when there is no discomfort. An arahant has discomfort, but he has no suffering. That's why white lies are bad.

Thaniyo: And if you could save somebody from suffering in the future by lying? Like if you were asked "Where is this person hiding?" when you know these people are looking for this person to harm or even kill them?

Nyanamoli: Well, on a most fundamental level, the reasons for your actions are always selfish—it cannot be otherwise. You choose to help others because that's what's going to make you happy, or you choose to help others because that's how you're going to avoid personal discomfort. Others are always secondary.

The only way to go about this is to accept it, and then stop perverting the order, as we just spoke about. Stop blaming the circumstances for your suffering and recognize that it's in your resisting the circumstances—that's where suffering is rooted. When you're hiding a fugitive or something, and then you lie to others and say "No, I don't know where that person is," then you're maybe saving their life—if that's at stake. But what you're really acting out of is your being responsible for choosing to have them in the first place. And then secondly, not wanting to experience the discomfort of responsibility because, if you say the truth, they'll find that person, and then things might happen to the person. You will be unable to not blame yourself, and blaming yourself is unpleasant. Really you just want to prevent circumstances from allowing you to engage in self-blaming, that's it. You're doing it for yourself.

That's why the Buddha said in the Suttas "If a person who is truthful to himself and truthful to others is questioned by kings or authorities thus, 'Have you seen this?' he would say, 'Yes, I've seen it'. If he hasn't seen it, he would say, 'No, I haven't seen it.' He won't say one or the other for no one's sake—he'll say the truth." Why? Because when you say the truth, if these people that are chasing the fugitive choose to do certain things to that fugitive, that's not on you, even if you say "Yes, he went into that house". It's not on you what they choose to do with him, or why, or to what extent. Your role is not to pervert the existential order from your point of view because, by doing so, you're giving priority to your point of view, which means it's a slippery slope.

If you act out of avoiding discomfort, that means you're going to be acting out of prolonging pleasure i.e. out of conceit, out of delusion. And those are the reasons for your own suffering, not the circumstances you've been subjected to. Practically, through trying to avoid suffering, you end up making yourself more and more liable for suffering, on that existential level. Hence, no lying, no stealing, no cheating, no killing. That's not negotiable because, without that basis, you cannot overcome the attitude of avoiding responsibility for your own existence and for your own suffering. You just can't, even if you want to.

Thaniyo: It's a major offence for a monk if he lies about having attained a superior state, if he lies about his wisdom. Why is that?

Nyanamoli: Well, because of the consequences of it, the results of the action, that's why.

Thaniyo: People take what you say as truth.

Nyanamoli: Well, exactly. It can spread for generations, and people will then be acting as if it were the truth, while in reality it isn't the truth. In other words, as the Buddha described in some other Suttas, giving to an enlightened being—making an offering to somebody who is factually awakened, free from suffering—is the greatest merit. So, if word gets out that so and so is factually free from suffering—he's an arahant—then most people will think "I'll quickly go and make some merit, because giving to that person is going to give much more merit than giving to anybody else who isn't enlightened." If that's the truth, they will actually get all those results, that great merit, because the person is factually an arahant. But say somebody spreads a lie that he's an arahant and nobody knows it's a lie, and then people go out of their way, and they don't give to others because they want to give to this arahant, but in reality he isn't an arahant. So that whole mess was created because somebody lied that that person is an arahant. As a direct result of that lie, many people have been misguided and they've been acting as if that person's an arahant, being sure they're going to get all this merit, dedicating all their offerings to that person because he's an arahant, and then it turns out he isn't. So they've been deceived directly as a result of that lie, which means the person who lied is going to be responsible for that mass deception which, as I said, can last for generations. That's why it's bad.

Thaniyo: You could say that a monk could be deceiving himself, which then deceives others.

Nyanamoli: Yes, but that's different. That's why it's not an offence if a monk does that out of overestimation. That's what I meant when I said that lying to others is not quite on the same level as lying to yourself, because lying to yourself means obscuring the truth. So simply by obscuring the truth, you're lying to yourself. But when you lie to others, it means you're fully aware of what truth is being obscured, and then you act completely the opposite way—so it's an extra layer.

That's why the attitude of bad faith—avoiding responsibility—is not as fully-fledged as lying to another person because, in order to lie, you need to know what the truth is. You can't lie if what you think you're saying is the truth. But when it comes to yourself, it's not that clear-cut, because you're already refusing to admit what the truth is—to be fully aware of what the truth is—which means you can't fully lie to yourself. Because in order to do so, you'd need to fully admit the truth to yourself. So lying to yourself is not on the level of actually lying to yourself, but it's on the level of repressing, turning away, ignoring the truth. That's why *avijjā* is ignorance. It's not a metaphysical lack of information of what the universe is—it's ignoring what's right in front of you. And lying to others comes on the basis of that principle—it's just further proliferated.

Thaniyo: And then there's the sustaining of the thing that you're lying about. Someone said, "Lying is the life-blood of addiction."

Nyanamoli: Sure, but you could say that the life-blood of lying is avoiding responsibility for your own experience. Fundamentally, the basis for lying is the attitude of bad faith to yourself, as in having faith in ignoring, not in what you're actually ignoring. That's what I mean: you pervert the order. The only way you can ignore something is if it's there—but you focus on prioritizing the act of ignoring, not what's already there. And that's the most fundamental attitude towards experience, *avijjā*. Turning a blind eye. The only way you can turn a blind eye to something is if that thing is already there, so the most fundamental attitude of turning a blind eye is that fundamental wrong-view in regard to the nature of existence—the fact that "I'm not my own". The fact that "I'm not in control of this—this body upon which my whole life depends. I'm subject to ageing, death, and suffering." All these things are obvious, but the only reason people do not resolve them is that they give priority to ignoring them. And that's what I mean—you give priority to your point of view on account of what's there, in regard to which you exercise your point of view. And that's why ignoring ignorance is a vicious circle—*avijjā* leads to more *avijjā*. Ignoring leads to maintenance of the attitude of ignoring.

What do I need to stop ignoring, to undo the entire *avijjā*, the whole *saṃsāra*? Stop ignoring the arisen feelings, ... the arisen intentions. And that's why a person who has made that effort and stopped ignoring these things will become incapable of engaging in ill-will, anger, lying, cheating—even sensuality, because sensuality in itself is already that perversion on the fundamental level—finding pleasure in that which is truly ugly. You ignore that it's ugly—ignorance of the ugly is the basis for attraction.

Thaniyo: Or the unattractive.

Nyanamoli: Yes, ignoring the fundamental unattractiveness, the fundamental dispassion or absence of passion in it—ignoring that is how you have maintained passion for it.

Thaniyo: What's the nature of concealment?

Nyanamoli: Well, in many of the Suttas and the Buddhist writings, you often hear about greed, aversion and delusion: lobha, dosa, and moha. People can get their head around greed and aversion, but often delusion is regarded as something that's not directly my responsibility, in as much as greed and aversion are.

Thaniyo: Like, "I don't know what I've done now."

Nyanamoli: Yes, so it's regarded in a semi-metaphysical sense—it's there, but it's not really something I can directly experience. But actually it is. Delusion is an attitude of your mind in as much as greed or lust and aversion are—otherwise they wouldn't have always been mentioned like that. So, from that point of view, delusion is more like an attitude of indolence, laziness.

Thaniyo: A choice to keep things cloudy.

Nyanamoli: Exactly. Keeping them opaque intentionally, turning a blind eye, distracting yourself intentionally with things that are going to take your mind away from yourself. You realize delusion is a very active thing and, as the Buddha said, that's why it's the most blameworthy. It's the hardest to undo as well. But the fact that you can undo it, means it's not this metaphysical lack of knowledge—it's your very attitude, that is even more fundamental than the attitude of lust and of aversion, which are secondary to it. Lust requires a basis of delusion, aversion requires a basis of delusion, delusion requires a basis of delusion. So, you are deluded through and through, not because you don't know certain things, but because you perpetually act out of ignorance, which then maintains you in the situation of ignorance. And the situation of ignorance is not ignorance as in not knowing something—it's you actively ignoring and giving priority to the ignoring.

It's choosing to distract yourself, for example by actively making a choice that will result in certain actions that are not necessarily lustful or hateful, but are based upon you not wanting to be self-aware.

Entertainment or distraction in general—like when you think "I'm bored by myself because I'm aware of everything and it's very unpleasant, so I'll just go and chat to some people—not for sensual reasons or because I like them—just because I want something to do."

Often needing things to do is rooted in delusion, in distraction, indolence. You can be very diligent externally—doing all this work—but the reasons for your doing that work are rooted in your wanting to turn a blind eye with regard to yourself—you don't want to be self-aware, basically.

Thaniyo: You don't want to see the truth of your mind.

Nyanamoli: Well yes, because that will result in seeing the unpleasant truths of your mind, or simply unpleasant states of boredom, and so on. So you think “I better find something to do, I better find an external purpose. It will occupy my mind, so my mind won’t be aware of itself, because it being aware of itself is too unpleasant, too threatening.”

Thaniyo: It’s a way to keep covering up the truth.

Nyanamoli: Exactly. It’s a way of maintaining yourself in a state of cover-up.

Thaniyo: To keep the dust moving.

Nyanamoli: Exactly, otherwise if it settles, you get to see what’s there, and it’s unpleasant.

Thaniyo: That’s the thing—being self-aware sounds like a good thing, but it’s the most painful thing. Most people avoid it.

Nyanamoli: Yes. That’s why solitude is very unpleasant to begin with.

As the Buddha himself said many times, you develop the pleasure of solitude. You won’t get it right away. If done rightly, it’s unpleasant because you’re going against the grain of all the distraction you got used to, and that your existence depends upon. But that’s it—when you stop maintaining all these attitudes that were based upon obscuring the self-awareness, the self-awareness increases. But it feels like—when the boredom starts giving rise to dread and anxiety—it feels like you yourself are drowning. It’s crushing you. But what is actually crushing you is the assumed level of your own being, the one that you’ve been proliferating.

The solitude is not actually crushing you. Being alone in your room—not seeing or talking to anyone—cannot do anything to you. But your mind can drown in it, because it becomes dependent on a certain degree of engagement with the world—that is its’ threshold. But that’s not a static thing, that threshold, which means the more you engage, the more dependent upon engagement you become. Initially the lesser engagement might hurt, because you’re used to engaging more. But then you get used to that, and then it will not be unpleasant.

In the same sense, when you’re a very hectic person who’s been doing a lot—engaging a lot, working a lot for whatever reasons— if you were made to sit down and stop engaging on that level, the discrepancy would be just too much to handle. But if you gradually start doing that and then start ceasing your engagement, you’ll get used to that new level—lacking the engagement that you used to have— which means you’re responsible for the threshold of where your being is. That’s what the Buddha meant when he said “His consciousness gets established upon that”—that becomes the norm, what you’re used to, which means anything less than that is going to fill you with anxiety and dread.

But it’s important to recognize that it’s not a static thing. So people seek meaning through using engagement with the world—actions, meaningless or not meaningless work, or whatever else. Practically,

you're engaging with the world for the purpose of escaping self-awareness, so you will become dependent on that level of engagement—anything less than that engagement will bring you back to your self-awareness. That means then that you have to keep maintaining the level of your engagement and, once you get used to it, you have to keep increasing it, if you try to use it to avoid self-awareness. And most people, to a degree, are using that—that's why most people are afraid to be alone. Not afraid of monsters and such, but afraid—in broad daylight—of being left alone in their room for a whole day without doing anything, without taking their mind away from themselves. It would result in them experiencing anxiety and existential dread because human life, on average, is about avoiding that self-awareness, which ties in with avoiding responsibility and feeds one another, and so on.

Thaniyo: But that self-awareness is the thing that's going to make things right, in a way.

Nyanamoli: That's why people are, because of their own actions, liable to suffering—because of that, not because of someone else's fault or some design. It's because you act in a manner that keeps making you liable to suffer, keeps you exposed.

If you take responsibility for it, that's where what I'm saying might become apparent—that the level of engagement, the level of distraction, or turning a blind-eye is not a static thing. Which means the way you've been proliferating it, you can also undo it if you stop engaging with it, or you can certainly put a brake on its growth.

That's why bhava (being) in the Suttas is not a metaphysical thing—it's the level of your dependence on the senses, which is sensual being, the level of dependence on the sense of the world, duty, perceptions—the level you depend on them. But then you can start depending less on those things.

That's why an arahant has attained cessation of his being—he doesn't depend on anything. But he's still there, it's not that cessation of being means destruction. Being means assumption—the assumption of engagement, of avoiding responsibility, of sensuality—and that's what delusion is: ignoring, turning a blind eye, distracting yourself, not being able to live with yourself. And again you can ask, going back to that practical level that we always do, “Why is it that I don't want to be self-aware? Why is it that I need to distract myself from myself? Because it's unpleasant. So why am I then maintaining this whole level of being for which I'm responsible, the level of how much I depend on engagement with things? It's because I don't want to suffer.”

Thaniyo: But failing to see that my very engagement is the root of my suffering.

Nyanamoli: Exactly. You might wonder “Why do I suffer, then? It's because I keep running away from suffering, that's why I suffer. Then, if I stop running away from suffering, I at least have a chance to not suffer.”

Thaniyo: There's an example I heard with people in prison. In prison, punishment may be solitary confinement, and a lot of people would rather spend their time with other criminals—rapists, murderers—than be alone.

Nyanamoli: Well, it's not incidental that that was always the worst punishment: solitary confinement for prolonged periods of time. For an untrained mind, of course.

Thaniyo: Also, some would rather do things that are bad for them, like taking drugs, than be alone.

Nyanamoli: You would rather expose yourself to genuine existential risks than be alone with yourself.

Thaniyo: Like jumping out of a plane, parachuting, where you think "I'll put my life on the line, and I'd rather do all of these extreme sports just to avoid being alone."

Nyanamoli: Yes, that's what I mean—it's not a stationary thing, which means avoiding boredom needs to be maintained, because boredom sets in when you get used to the threshold—then you need to do more.

The same with sensuality, if people use sensuality as a means of escape, if people get angry as a means of escape, that's why they keep getting angrier and angrier as life goes by. They keep getting used to it and it ceases to work—their means of escape ceases to work, so then they need to keep running harder.

Thaniyo: The truth is always there and it's always pushing.

Nyanamoli: Always. The fact that you give in to the attitude of ignoring the truth that's always there, means you're running around in a circle—you don't ever really run away from it. And everybody knows that.

If you ask any random person—even someone not familiar with Buddhism—whether one can satisfy one's sensual desires, most people will already know you can't. You can't satisfy them, you can only run around them. The same with anger: the satisfaction of revenge or inflicting pain back onto somebody—is that really preventing you from experiencing the pain in the first place? No. You know that, you just can't help it. And you can't help it because you keep ignoring the truth, you keep ignoring the nature of what's right in front of you. Hence, ignoring will automatically, inevitably, result in lust and aversion, in greed and anger and so on.

But that doesn't mean that, if you lock yourself in a room and stop engaging with the world, you will automatically arrive at the right understanding either, because it's a subtle thing. That's why the Buddha's instruction was necessary, or the instruction of somebody who's done it themselves the right way. The two possible outcomes for somebody who doesn't have that external instruction, if they were to lock themselves in, are madness—as in the mind would implode because it wouldn't know the way out of itself. Or you would develop a degree of that self-transparency and undo a great level of your being, which means you'd become more transparent—less subjected to suffering—but you would have to give in to something. You wouldn't be able to maintain that transparency all the way to the core of your being, whereby you've

undone every one of the slightest existential discrepancies—or slightest conceits, as the Buddha called them—and become an arahant. Because if you did that, you would be self-enlightened. So theoretically it's possible, but practically it's highly unlikely.

But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't even try. Even a person who's not necessarily interested in becoming fully enlightened and following the Buddha's instruction to the end, it would do them good if they'd start withdrawing or keeping in check the level of engagement and dependence on the world and the senses. Why? Because life will end in your losing that dependence on sickness, ageing and death. Losing your senses, the perception of the world, losing the things upon which your existence depends—or rather the things you used to maintain that level of being, that helped you to ignore yourself, to be unaware of yourself and the responsibility that's inherent in that awareness. If life were truly to last forever and you would always stay in control of your senses, then it would be fine—you could do it (indulge in senses). But it isn't, and you know that—everybody knows that. Yet you act as if you will live forever, and the more you're dependent on the senses that will disappear and break apart, the more you'll be affected when that happens. The less you're dependent, the less you'll be affected, and means the less you'll suffer.

It's like the simile the Buddha gave: climbing the tree to eat the mangos, and eventually somebody's bound to come up and cut that tree because they can't climb it to eat the mangos. Or even if they don't, the mangos will age and break down, and the tree will fall. The higher you were up in that tree the harder you will crash, the more suffering you will experience. But if you kept yourself in check and stayed maybe on lower branches, used your reason and self-reflection to not go too far out, if you controlled yourself from climbing the tree in the first place, then you wouldn't crash as hard.

In practical terms, you keep yourself in check with regard to how much you depend on distraction, on other people, other people's company, on gratuitous health, your senses and the ability to access the world and distract yourself. If you reflected on it, you will keep yourself in check and then won't go too far in it. And then when you do get sick—when your senses do start to fail or when people leave you, or die, or don't do what you want them to do—you won't be as affected, because you haven't made yourself as dependent.

Thaniyo: But if you have concealed so much your whole life...

Nyanamoli: If you've concealed so much your whole life, it's never too late to start undoing that concealment. So that's really the problem there—if you never start undoing your own concealing of yourself from yourself, concealing the nature of yourself from yourself.

Thaniyo: You never actually faced displeasure.

Nyanamoli: Yes. Never admitted it where it is, where the problem of it is. That's why people are responsible for being bound to saṃsāra—it's not saṃsāra that binds you, you bind yourself to it. And the Buddha said something to the same effect when he said "It's because people take what's not theirs—what shouldn't be theirs, what cannot be theirs, as if it's theirs and they act out of it that Māra does with them what he wants", controls them, subjects them to all these things. What are the things that cannot be yours and shouldn't be

yours, but you keep taking as yours, and actually belong to Māra and not to you? It's your eyes and your sights, your nose and your smells—your very senses. The nature of them shows you that they're not yours. If you ignore this, you automatically take them as yours.

That's why just turning a blind eye is enough in itself to result in the whole mass of suffering. It's not like "I turn a blind eye, then I do a second step of taking it as mine, then I do this..." No, turning a blind eye to the nature of your senses, for example your eyes, your nose, your body, your life, automatically implies taking this as yours. Because if you ignore that it's not yours, you're automatically implying that it is yours, that it's for you, that it's in your control. And then you keep acting as if it is in your control, and that's how you perpetuate the turning of a blind eye—you keep acting out of it. You've got to stop acting out of it and then stop doing it internally, stop turning that blind eye, start admitting it, go against the grain.

That's why everybody can benefit from solitude, to the extent that they're able to practice it. But if you don't practice it to the full extent, you have to take responsibility for that as well. You might find yourself already too far in life, whereby you can't just withdraw from everything because there'll be consequences. But that's no-one else's responsibility—you're responsible for finding yourself in such a situation. But then people realize that they can't withdraw themselves from that situation, so then they feel justified in avoiding responsibility for it, and that's completely gratuitous. Yes, you might not be able—you may have infants and whatever other family members depending on you, and you can't just leave, because they'll die. But that doesn't mean you're justified now in ignoring responsibility for that situation that you yourself built up. So yes, you can't ignore the fact that your choices brought you to these circumstances, where now other lives depend upon you, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't take responsibility for it—no matter how late the recognition of that responsibility comes. It's still better to take it than to ignore it further – because, who knows, through taking responsibility, some new ways and options might present themselves that you won't see as long as you're avoiding responsibility. But people don't take responsibility because it's unpleasant.

Thaniyo: When taking responsibility, things become clearer.

Nyanamoli: But because you're too concerned about not experiencing discomfort, you basically obscure and limit all these options that you could have otherwise become aware of. That's why you actually get more resilience—become less subjected to suffering—through recognizing, admitting, taking responsibility. It's initially more unpleasant—but in the long run, it's actually far more pleasant, or far less unpleasant.

Let's put it like this: because through taking responsibility, you see where the problem is, and the problem is in avoiding responsibility. That's why you suffer. You suffer not because a disagreeable feeling touches you—you suffer because you avoid responsibility for the suffering in regard to the disagreeable feeling. If you start taking responsibility for that suffering, in regard to the disagreeable feeling, you stop blaming it for that suffering—which means you stop resisting, which means you stop suffering. That's it.

Thaniyo: You stop touching it.

Nyanamoli: You stop getting into the domain that doesn't belong to you—that belongs to Māra. If you stop taking it as yours, that's it—you cannot be affected by anything then, no matter how disagreeable.

THE NECESSITY OF CELIBACY

By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

Practice of celibacy is always beneficial. Even for a lay person, who is not necessarily Buddhist or familiar with the Dhamma. The obvious reason for its benefits is the inevitable increase of the mental strength that comes with the restraint. This restraint is intentional and aims at a very powerful desire that otherwise shapes and controls one's whole life. Sensuality/sexuality is something that heavily contributes towards defining one's actions and choices. It is something that has at least some influence in virtually all of them.

Thus, adopting a practice of restraint of the sensual desire, a person will be going against that grain of the natural sexual pull of one's own body. Through willingly imposing this restraint, the mind will be pressured to grow – in terms of strength and in terms of enduring of itself. (As the case with any strength development is. Gradually increasing resistance, increases the capacity to hold the very same.)

Sometimes people think that not having sexual intercourse is all that being celibate means. That doesn't constitute the celibacy we are talking about here. The difference is to not be celibate only because the current circumstances are presenting no options, but to actually be celibate as a result of determination and practice of restraint. (And then one might decide to live in the circumstance that present no options, and that's fine.) It's important to not misunderstand this. We are not saying that one somehow needs to be tempting oneself with sensuality. "Flirting" with it, so to speak, to keep reinforcing the practice of saying "no" to it. That's ridiculous. And completely misguided and countering the right efforts. Flirting with sensuality can only be done out of sensuality. (As the Buddha said, it's not possible to have sensual perception without the mind being bound by sensuality.) So, tempting oneself with sensuality, it's already a form of engaging with sensuality. As such, it goes against the practice of the celibate determinations.

"Firstly, a man who claims to be perfectly celibate does not mutually engage in sex with a woman. However, they consent to being anointed, massaged, bathed, and rubbed by a woman. They enjoy it and like it and find it satisfying. This is a corruption, flaw, blemish, or taint in celibacy. This is called one who lives the celibate life impurely, tied to the fetter of sex. They're not freed from rebirth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress. They're not freed from suffering, I say.

Furthermore, a man who claims to be perfectly celibate does not mutually engage in sex with a woman. Nor do they consent to massage and bathing. However, they laugh and play and have fun with women; they gaze into a woman's eyes; they listen through a wall or rampart to the sound of women laughing or chatting or singing or crying; they recall when they used to laugh, chat, and have fun with women; they see a householder or their child amusing themselves, supplied and provided with the five kinds of sensual pleasures; they don't see a householder or their child amusing themselves, supplied and provided with the five kinds of sensual pleasures. However, they live the celibate life wishing to be reborn in one of the orders of gods. They think: 'By this precept or observance or

mortification or spiritual life, may I become one of the gods!’ They enjoy it and like it and find it satisfying. These are corruptions, flaws, blemishes, or taints in celibacy. This is called one who lives the celibate life impurely, tied to the fetter of sex. They’re not free from rebirth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress. They’re not free from suffering, I say.

As long as I saw that these seven sexual fetters—or even one of them—had not been given up in me, I didn’t announce my supreme perfect awakening in this world with its gods, Maras and Brahmas, this population with its ascetics and brahmins, its gods and humans.

But when I saw that these seven sexual fetters—every one of them—had been given up in me, I announced my supreme perfect awakening in this world with its gods, Maras and Brahmas, this population with its ascetics and brahmins, its gods and humans. Knowledge and vision arose in me: ‘My freedom is unshakable; this is my last rebirth; now there are no more future lives.’” – Anguttara Nikaya, 7.50

So, it’s this determination, the decision to not engage with sensuality ever again that makes all the difference. Just like when a person is trying to give up smoking for example. It will be much harder to do so if you bring yourself up to decide to never smoke again, as opposed to deciding it to quit it half-heartedly for a month or so. The former would exert much more pressure on an individual and even someone who was not a heavy, but a casual, smoker would feel the whole weight of it. And this is even more true of celibacy. And it is necessary to determine it in such a decisive manner.

Only then the mind will be pushed towards development (provided it doesn’t break) of strength on that corresponding level. Anything short of it, the mind will just tread water until the pressure of sexuality builds up, and then inevitably give in. Determining it decisively, however, means that person’s entire life will have to be affected by the profound shift in significance of ordinary things in day to day life. This is pretty much the main reason why most people would be afraid of doing it.

As hard as it might seem, it is still very much possible to succeed with a persistent effort over a period of time. If one modifies one’s environment to support the restraint and to not add more to the already existing pressure, the mind can eventually become dry of the inherent “wetness” of the desires. Then everything in a person’s life that was depending on the acts of sensuality and non-restraint, will also “dry out”. A person would be free from it. This refers to the inherent worries of protecting what one has acquired, pains of craving towards what one doesn’t have yet, obstacles of one’s worldly ambitions, and similar. All these things will have no significance any more. They will not be able to cause one to suffer on account of them.

It is also important to mention that the sooner one starts this practice the better. It is not uncommon for people to think that they have time to get older and pursue sexual and sensual desires. And then afterwards, they can practice restraint and free themselves from desires. Unfortunately, it’s quite the opposite: the longer one waits the harder it will be to discern sensuality and do something about it. With old age, sexuality goes “underground” so to speak. The time comes when the body loses its vigour and the sexuality won’t manifest any more in a form of obvious physical behaviour and thirst. This can mislead a person to believe that they are free from it. What actually happened was that sexuality has now descended from something that was

discernible (bodily actions and thoughts of such) to something that's virtually invisible. A subtle background that becomes a ubiquitous motivation for all sorts of habits, acts and even psychological needs. They wouldn't carry the sensual flavour to them anymore. A flavour that used to be very clear on the surface of them at all. If the mind hasn't made the effort, while the aim of the effort was obvious, it won't be able to do it now. Of course, it is still possible in theory at least. But, when the strength and determination fade with the body, having been left undeveloped for so long, it is very unlikely that that will change. (The Suttas, though, do list a few exceptions of very old people reaching arahantship. But those were rare, which is why they were so clearly remembered.)

Thus, the sooner the better. That's also why many people in the time of the Buddha were inspired to see young monks and nuns in prime of their life. Meaning: they were at the time of their lives when sensuality was still available and easy to get. They have not just given it up, but ended up enjoying the practice of restraint and understanding the Dhamma.

“Then that devata said to the Venerable Samiddhi: “You have gone forth while young, bhikkhu, a lad with black hair, endowed with the blessing of youth and strength, in the prime of life, without having dallied with sensual pleasures. Enjoy human sensual pleasures, bhikkhu; do not abandon what is directly visible in order to pursue what takes time.”

“I have not abandoned what is directly visible, friend, in order to pursue what takes time. I have abandoned what takes time in order to pursue what is directly visible. For the Blessed One, friend, has stated that sensual pleasures are time-consuming, full of suffering, full of despair, and the danger in them is still greater, while this Dhamma is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise.” — SN 1.20

We must stress here that practice of sense restraint would be beneficial even to those who have no interest in practising the Dhamma – fully or partially. Because if the mind manages to become stronger than the sensual pull, and learns how to go beyond sensual cravings, it will to a great degree go beyond the burdens that come with the sensuality. Burdens that are otherwise unavoidable and bring much worry and suffering. Going beyond sensuality will also lessen the grip of one's own Ego and all the conceit underlying it would be reduced. The anxieties, lack of satisfaction, guilt over things done in the past – all of that would disappear or be significantly removed. Of course, we can only imagine what greater freedom can be gained, if on top of the steadfast restraint, one also practices the Dhamma instructions towards uprooting even the subtle conceit and cravings.

The entire life of a person most often revolves around following desires. Trying to get what one wants is the most fundamental habit of a human mind. This is quite normal, but the problem is in that what people want is almost always rooted in sensuality. One's desires are most often aimed at the pursuit of the pleasures gained through physical senses. Pleasant sights, sounds, tastes, smells and touches. Subtle or coarse. If a man begins to learn how to go against this sensual “grain” that exerts pressure on him, that will already mean a beginning of strength. Of course, mere resistance to such sensual cravings will not be able to uproot the sensuality in itself. For that, understanding of the nature of that sensuality will be necessary. But this is only

possible on the basis of the sense restraint. For example, if a person has been adhering to the practice of restraint and abstaining from intentionally giving in to sense desires, that person will be able to see the gratuitous nature of the sensual desire in a form of one's own thoughts. It is something that has arisen completely uninvited, yet pressures one to act upon it as if it is truly owned by him. Sticking to this kind of reflection can reveal that even things that one does want and desire, are rooted and arisen as something that is fundamentally outside of one's control. One's responsibility lies not in preventing those thoughts from arising, but in choosing to delight and entertain them. Or not, as the Buddha would tell. In brief: being able to see the uncontrollable (gratuitous) nature of one's own desires, one can overcome the pressure that they exert on him.

The main reason why most people wouldn't even consider the practice of celibacy is because it's simply too difficult. Because of that it is also unlikely that a man would choose to do it, outside of some sort of philosophical belief or a religious practice. There just wouldn't be enough motivation.

To reiterate: freedom from sensuality starts by giving it up first. Saying "no" to it. That is not optional. This initial effort can then enable a person to allow the nature of desire to manifest and arise. As opposed to someone who tries to prevent this, or rather cover it up. This cover up is due to instantaneous giving in to the pressure of desire (if not physically, at least mentally). Or it is due to trying to prevent it and deny it. (The former and the latter correspond to sensual indulgence and self-mortification respectively.)

Giving in to the pressure, distracts one from seeing what is it that pressures him in the first place. Denying it, does the same. If one learns how to endure it through restraint, then it can become clear that there is no pressure of sensuality without one's body. A person at a face value regards one's own body as basis for pleasure. It's seen to be something "free" and "effortless". Something that belongs to "me". That in itself is a sufficient reason for giving in to it. Hence, it's not incidental that the Buddha often compared sensuality to a "bait".

If one contemplates the necessity of the living healthy body for any sensual engagements (fleeting or otherwise), it can be discerned that even the pleasures that one can gain from it belong to the actual sense organs. As in: pleasures are inseparable and inconceivable without them. Thus, if one wants to overcome the entire domain of sensuality, one can do so by overcoming the ownership of the sense organs (or the body as a whole). And extinguishing of the ownership, i.e. the necessary condition of sensuality, is done by understanding that it was impossible to own the body in the first place. If that were not so, then one's desires would already be all satisfied (i.e. there would be no desires to begin with). Alternatively, one can contemplate that if one were the true master and owner of one's own body, that body would not be subject to illness, aging and death. It would not be liable to accidents, elements, circumstances, etc. This kind of understanding can only be properly developed on the basis of restraint and celibacy. And once it is developed, then restraint will become a normal mode of behaviour. It will not be a way of "resistance" to the sensual pull any more, because there will be no more senses that can pull one. Senses and their respective desires are a problem only when they are "mine".
